



RELEASE THAT WITCH

BOOK 09

Er Mu

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

Release That Witch

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by

Er Mu

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Synopsis

Cheng Yan transmigrated only to end up in a medieval Europe like world, becoming Roland, a Royal Prince. But this world doesn't seem to be the same as his former world, despite some similarities. Witches are real and they actually can use magic?

Follow Roland's battle for the throne against his siblings. Will he be able to win, even though the king already declared him to be a hopeless case and with the worst starting situation? With his knowledge of modern technologies and the help of the witches, who are known as devils' servants and are hunted by the the Holy Church, he might have a fighting chance.

Now, let his journey begin.

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Chapter 801: Endless City

"Is this... really OK?" Through the commanding post's window, Echo saw those Sand Nation civilians being whipped and tumbling on the ground. She could not help but feel sorry for them.

"They never knew what discipline was. They lived by the rule that 'the Weak are Prey to the Strong'. If we're to put these people into use sooner, other than sending them to war, this is the only way." Iron Axe replied in respect. "You hadn't been in the Southernmost Region for long and during that period, the chief was very concerned about you, so you might not be familiar with the small clans' natures. Such a kind of discipline isn't severe. One can even say it's necessary, otherwise they would consider Osha a clan with no authority, weak and easy to bully."

At this, he showed a rare hint of hesitation. "I think the reason that you're not used to it is probably that... His Majesty is sometimes too benevolent."

"Completely agreed." Andrea, resting her upper body on the window sill, shrugged. "There is a saying among the nobles 'carrots combined with sticks make the best way of ruling the subjects'. The bigger the carrots are, the more benevolent the Lord will be."

"What are carrots?" Hummingbird asked in curiosity.

"They're kind of food, similar to His Majesty's corn, a sort of specialty of the Kingdom of Dawn," Andrea explained. "But no matter how big the carrots are, they should always be much smaller than the sticks, which indicates that punishment should be more severe than awards so that the subjects would appreciate the favor. A Lord such as Roland would be considered a black sheep in the City of Glow."

"Rare as it is, truthfully, I agree with you," Ashes said while pouting.

"His Majesty is especially eloquent?" With her chin resting on her hands, Hummingbird thought for a while and said, "The words he taught Thuram to speak sound very reasonable... The collective power is definitely stronger than an individual's power."

"But Thuram merely repeated what Roland told him to say." Iron Axe shook his head, smiling. "Without seeing Neverwinter personally, one can never imagine what an inconceivable new order His Majesty has established. I believe that one day in the future, Graycastle will become another Neverwinter, but that day is definitely not today... To make them remember the rules in the Soutern Territory, whips are more powerful than words."

Echo slightly sighed without saying a word.

"Commander-in-chief." A soldier suddenly walked into the commanding post and said, "There is a riot breaking out in the Fallingstone Clan and the Spring Clan. Some people are confronting the Defending Army."

"For boarding the ship?" Iron Axe asked solemnly.

"Yes. Those who were squeezed into the water called for their families. They asked for the same amount of food and reward. They argued that it's not that they didn't want to go to the Blackwater Valley, but that the Osha had turned them down."

"Alright. Who is guarding the camp?"

"The Second Battalion of Flintlock."

"Call up two squads and those young Osha lads who wanted to join the First Army. Tell them to gather at the riot spot. I'll be there right away."

"Yes, Sir!"

Seeing that Iron Axe was about to leave, Echo could not help but call him and said, "Please don't be too harsh on them."

Iron Axe stood in the doorway quietly for a moment, bowed to

her and then said, "I understand, Miss Silvermoon. I'll do it in moderation."

After Iron Axe left, Echo returned to the desk, feeling melancholy. The process of the Sand Nation's relocation at the north did not go as smoothly as she expected. Although they could lead a well-off life as long as they follow His Majesty's instructions, some people still took the message that Roland asked her to deliver as a lie. Even those who had gained a piece of fertile land did not completely trust her nor His Majesty.

Now she was sort of missing her life in Neverwinter.

Compared with leading the strongest clan, she preferred the time when she stood on the top of the castle, overlooked the mountains and the city, and sung the songs composed by His Majesty. When the melody that she had never heard of sounded, she could feel genuine freedom and happiness.

She had not sung for a long time since coming here... She wondered whether Roland had written any new songs.

"When can I sing out aloud again?"

...

"Oh!" Simbady felt as though everything in his stomach was overturned. Along with the rise and fall of the Concrete Boat, some gastric acid welled up from his stomach again. Regardless of the vomit along the side of the boat from other people, he directly bent over the handrail and began to throw up.

"Hi, are you okay?" Molly patted him on his back. His face was slightly pale. The Concrete Boat, steady as the ground while in the bay, became a swaying leaf when upon the sea. Bobbing in waves, it nearly hit the offshore beach several times. The horizontal waving never stopped. It was a total torture for the Sand Nation civilians that were experiencing the sea for the first time.

"Ahem... Almost fine." After throwing up, he laid on the deck

lifelessly. "Do you know how long we've been on the sea?"

"Today is the fifth day."

"This isn't right..." Simbady gasped and said in a low voice, "Do you remember what the Clearspring Clan said? They... live in the oasis by the sea. We passed the Iron Sand City at first dusk, which means the Concrete Boat travels really fast. Yet why haven't we arrived at the Blackwater Valley?"

"You mean..." Molly asked.

"The destination of Osha isn't the Blackwater Valley. Thuram lied. The place he's taking us is further south than the Choke Swamp!"

"Further south?" Molly started to worry. "But there is nothing there. Could they be lost?"

"The boat has been travelling along the coastline, which means it is highly unlikely for them to get lost." Simbady pressed at his forehead. "If we're going somewhere closer to the south point than the Choke Swamp, it'll only be..."

"Everybody, cheer up!" Before Simbady finished talking, Thuram suddenly appeared on the center of the deck and his words interrupted Simbady's, "I've some good news. We're arriving at our destination. Pack your luggage, line up, and prepare to disembark. Remember, be careful not to fall into the sea anymore, because no one will rescue you this time!"

Simbady propped up his upper body and peered beyond the shore. On shore it was still barren, no oasis to be seen. His speculation was confirmed by the rolling water vapor and gusted smoke columns on the sea in distance.

There was only one place that could give such an inconceivable view,

the Endless Cape. The exile place of the Mojins.

More and more Sand Nation people civilians noticed the anomaly and became quite on edge on the deck.

"This is not the Blackwater Valley! You lied to us!"

"Why did you bring us to the Endless Cape? Do you want to abandon us here?"

"I want to go back. Please, let us leave!"

"Shut up!" At this moment, Thuram felt there was no need to conceal anything anymore. "Have I said that we were going to the middle area of the Blackwater Valley? The valley tributaries run through the entire southern region, of course it includes the cape area. Any underground Styx's River is extended from the valley, am I right?"

"This is sophistry!" Simbady thought angrily. If they had been told to work in the exile place, he was afraid that not many would apply for it.

"Nobody is going to be abandoned here. People from Osha and Graycastle will join you in developing this area!" Thuram raised his arm and spoke loudly, "Listen carefully. From now on, Endless Cape is no longer an exile area. It'll be a newly born town! This is the order from the chief!"

Chapter 802: Ironwhip Discipline

"To build a new city... in this place?"

Simbady found it hard to believe his own ears. The Silver Stream got slimmer as it went south, finally it was entirely devoured by sand until it reached the Blackwater Valley. Hence came the name "the Land of Exile".

Without water and an oasis, how could they survive in the vast desert?

All the Sand Nation civilians on board were shocked by Thuram's speech, several of them stated their doubts like the one that Simbady had.

"We can create water by ourselves." Thuram spoke loudly. "But before that, the vanguard troop has found a usable water source. You'll see it when you get off the boat."

This aroused even more severe discussion.

"Create?" some people shouted. "How do we do that?"

"Silver Stream is a gift from Mother Earth. How could we create it?"

"By the name of Three Gods, only deities' emissaries could turn the desert into an oasis..."

"If we can't succeed, can we return the Southern Territory?"

"Right, you won't leave us here and go back alone, will you?"

Confronted by these questions, Thuram hesitated for the first time. Simbady noticed that Thuram peeked at the Graycastle civilians before he thundered, "The chief is capable of anything. As as he said we can, we can definitely create water. What you need to do however, is to follow instructions. Besides, Lady Silvermoon has promised, if we can't succeed, you'll be sent back to the Port of Clearwater in advance and paid with three months salary!" At this,

he patted at the whip upon his waist. "Of course, I won't return without you. If anyone loafes on the job, be prepared to taste my Ironwhip!"

"That explains it..." Simbady realized that the leader of the team was not Thuram, but those poker-faced people from Graycastle who were standing behind Thuram.

During the holy duel, he had heard of the mightiness of these people more than once. Different from the Queen of Clearwater, they did not appear short of strength even when confronted by the warriors of big clans. But at this Endless Cape, even though they could defeat the watchdogs overnight, they still meant nothing in front of this endless sea of sand.

Both the northerners and the chief might have far underestimated the power of the desert.

Unfortunately, for them, there were not many options left.

About an hour later, the Concrete Boat slowly pulled in to shore. Dragging his sore and exhausted body, Simbady slowly walked off the boat. The moment when his feet touched the soft beach, he felt a long-lost relaxation.

Finally, his world stopped shaking.

"Look, what's that?" Molly pointed somewhere remote on the inland. "A Watch Tower?"

Simbady looked in the direction that Molly was pointing at and saw a black iron tower standing in the sand not far from the beach. At the top of the tower were two flags, one of which was scarlet, the other was with a complex embroidery pattern.

Ordinarily, Simbady would wonder why the girl who he only had an occasional conversation with would stay with him all the time, but now he was too weak to consider things in this aspect. "Has someone... arrived ahead of us?"

"Let's go and take a look."

"Later." He shook his head. "We'd better wait for Sir Thuram's instructions."

Those Sand Nation civilians who had fallen into the water previously left a vivid memory in Simbady's mind. He did not wish for the girl that he had a crush on to be whipped in front of everybody.

"Molly, finally I've found you!" Molly's clansmen gradually came to her. "Simbady, what a surprise to see you here."

"I thought you had passed out on the boat from seasickness."

"Haha..." The crowd smirked.

Simbady lowered his head in embarrassment. Indeed, he was the weakest among his clansmen, be it in strength or guts. Usually, he would not mind being ridiculed, but today, in Molly's presence, he felt especially shameful. In fact, his performance in this voyage was even poorer than Molly's.

"Look, there is an iron tower!"

"How did people transport something so heavy to this place?"

"Probably by boat? I heard there is a direct shipping lane from Graycastle to the Endless Cape."

"Will we camp there tonight?"

"I guess so. Endless Cape is way more dangerous than an oasis. It must be guarded at night."

There were only just over 20 men were from the Fishbone Clan, which made them a fairly small group, but they were all of the young and strong members of the clan. One of them was called Carlone. Carlone was a strong performer among his peers, he was tall, handsome and skillful, which won him the favor of his clan chief. The moment he opened his mouth, he drew everybody's attention, "I once escorted the exiled for Iron Sand City. According to my observation, the sizes of sandworms and scorpions in this

area are much larger than those in an oasis. There's even a rumor that a Giant Scorpion with Armor that dominates Earth also moves around here. We must stay alert at all times and set our tents as close to those from Graycastle as possible."

"Do you think Sir Thuram is telling the truth? Can the chief really create an oasis out of this desert?" somebody asked.

"Most unlikely," Carlon smacked his lips and said. "If he were really capable of that, he could have been the ruler of the desert without going through the holy duel. Why bother developing this area then?"

"What should we do next?" The crowd began to stir.

"Relax. The chief doesn't have to go through all of this trouble, only to exile us here." Carlon's voice was full of calmness and confidence. "The chief might have decided on this action on the spur of the moment. When the people from Graycastle find that their goals can't be realized, our work will end. As to three months of salary, Osha can't get away with it!"

"That's right, or no one will ever trust them again!"

"That's reassuring. I'm Ok as long as we can go back."

The clansmen nodded, indicating their agreement, except for Simbady. He did not entirely agree with what Carlon had said. It was true that Graycastle had undervalued the desert and their plan of turning Endless Cape into a town was destined to fail. But looking at those soldiers in uniforms whose facial expression was nothing but solemn, he faintly felt the chief did not decide on this action on the spur of the moment.

By then, the crowd began scattering and some people began to move toward the iron tower. Thuram was still talking with the people from Graycastle, totally indifferent to what was happening around him.

"Shall we go there too?" some clansmen proposed.

"I think so," Caralone said, nodding. "If we're really going to camp around the iron tower, we can get a better place if we go earlier. Everybody, follow me." He took a look at Molly especially and asked, "Do you want my help with your luggage?"

Molly hesitated, shook her head and then said, "Simbady said we'd better wait for Sir Thuram's instruction... Didn't he always emphasize the importance of following the discipline?"

"It's not like we refused to get off the boat. Why does he care about this?"

"Simbady, you're not intimidated by the Endless Cape, are you?"

"Perhaps he's still sick." The clansman who ridiculed him previously, did so again.

"I'm just worried." Simbady raised his head. Just when he was about to justify himself, a burst of a hasty whistle interrupted him.

"Everybody, gather now!" Thuram, who previously ignored those who left, quietly walked in front of the clansmen, stuck out three fingers and grimly said, "I give you three breaths of time, after that, every breath means one whip. This is the second lesson I'm teaching you. Do remember that!"

Chapter 803: "Festivity"

Simbady had thought it was just a bluff. He had never expected Osha clan was serious.

When the warriors from Osha clan were about to execute the order, a clash broke out between the two groups. Over 50 people, who regarded the punishment as unreasonable and attempted to escape the discipline, started to tussle with the ones who tried to catch them.

Unarmed, the wrongdoers soon lost their battle to Osha clan equipped with clubs and shields. They were, as a result, stripped naked and prostrated to the sandy ground.

Thuram whipped them himself.

The whipping scene inflamed some of the spectators, who were on the verge of starting a virulent altercation but were eventually deterred by the flintlocks carried by Graycastle men.

Everybody had learned the miserable defeat of the watchdog in the oasis that night.

Even cavalrymen swift like winds had failed to penetrate Graycastle's defensive line.

What had crushed them was exactly the same shiny iron weapons in those soldiers' hands.

In a second, screams and shrieks filled the bank.

Osha did not plan to flog those clansmen to death. After he showed their bleeding backs to the whole group, he instructed them to treat the wounds with herbs and bandage them with gauze. Normally, there was rarely any plague in the freezing Months of Demons. As long as they were physically strong, they should survive the whipping.

Carlone and most of the clansmen were outraged, except Molly,

who rejoiced over the punishment.

After the fearsome whipping was over, the group formed two lines and headed to the depth of the desert under the guidance of the whistle.

Thuram did not utter a word, but everybody became automatically self-disciplined. The procession was in an exceptional order.

When they were close to an iron tower, Simbady discovered a drying oasis, or rather a pond. This was probably what Thuram referred to as the water fountain for the vanguard. No shades of trees overhung the pond, except a few dying bushes around it. The pond was very shallow, the depth of which was no more than a man's height. Perhaps, it had been a verdant oasis a few decades ago. However, as the water vein of Silver Stream gradually diminished, the oasis, in the end, reduced to a cup of sand.

The pond would not even suffice to provide drinking water for the few hundred labors working here, let alone to nurture a tribe. That water could still be seen was because of the remnant of underground streams. Once summer came, those meager water would soon evaporate under the scorching sun. Even if no one drank the water, the pond would become completely dry in no time.

Simbady had seen a lot of ruins of oasis like this.

In other words, if those Graycastle men failed to find a new water source within two or three months, they would have no choice but to leave this land, not to mention establishing a new town.

Thuram did not pretend that he was not aware of the scarcity of the water. He hollered at the team, "Do you see this pond here? This is going to be the only drinking water for us in the next couple of months. So, make your water elsewhere. Are you all clear?"

"What about... food?" someone asked.

"Somebody will deliver food to us. If there isn't enough, we can go fishing," Thuram replied.

Hearing they would at least have food and water, all the clans relieved a little bit. The group thus dispersed and pitched their tents based on the instructions of the supervisor from Osha clan.

How to quickly set up and take down a tent was a must-have life skill for every sand nation. A tent made of sheepskin could shelter three to six people, and usually, one person was responsible to carry all the required tools and equipment. There were only four women from Fishbone clan who had applied for the job, so they erected three tents which arrayed in a triangle shape, each of which was fastened by a rope. The door of each tent was flung open facing outward, as a way to alert each other in case of danger. This was the simplest tent arrangement among all.

In the afternoon, Thuram whistled again and summoned everybody. He then took them to a place close to the beach.

Simbady was surprised to find out that northerners had conducted a thorough search here.

On the flat sandy ground stood numerous short wooden poles, each pole tied to a white rope. Like dividing domains, these ropes and poles segmented the land into many huge rectangles. Each rectangle was 60 meters in length at least.

The most incredible thing was that all the rectangles were of the same size, every edge and corner of which was precisely marked and measured. Simbady wondered how they did that within a distance of 60 meters.

There were 50 or 60 rectangles marked out by white ropes by a rough count. Simbady also saw some Graycastle men keep marking the land with wooden poles, with strange tools in their hands. It seemed they planned to continue to do so until all the land in their sights was covered.

"You're finally here." A tall man came up to Thuram. "My name is Kencury. I'm a former member of the Mason Guild in the old king's city... Well, you've probably never heard of this organization. Even in Graycastle, few people remember the Mason Guild these days. Thanks to the benevolent king who's willing to hire us, we're able to settle down. Otherwise, we probably don't know where we'll end up ... Um, that's not quite right. Let's leave this matter at a later date." The man coughed and patted Thuram on his shoulder. "Anyway, I'll be responsible for the construction of Endless Cape. I assume you're the supervisor appointed by Miss Echo, right?"

Echo? Isn't it Lady Drow Silvermoon's nickname? Simbady was shocked by the fact that the Graycastle men named Kencury sat as equal with the chief at the same table!

Not custom to the small talks and Kencury's overelaborate formalities, Thuram made a stiff smile. He stepped back and bowed. "Please call me Thuram. As to those lads, just let me know what they should do. If anyone slacks off, I'll punish them severely."

Apparently, Thuram had received instructions from the chief of Osha clan, for he paid great respects to Kencury. But Simbady knew it was those Graycastle soldiers guarding this area that Thuram was truly afraid of.

Kencury stretched out his arms. "Very well. Guys, there's no tavern or woman here. Ahem, I mean that kind of woman. So, concentrate on the construction! The first task for you is very simple, which is digging holes. See those white rectangles? Dig a hole in each rectangle until the sand has reached your knees!"

For a moment, nobody responded. There was an embarrassing silence.

Thuram's brows went up. He bellowed, "Are you guys all deaf? Get your ass moving!" He sounded quite ill-tempered, but a hint of triumph in his eyes betrayed his complacency.

But Kencury raised his hand and stopped Thuram. "Hang on... No need to rush. I haven't explained to them why we have to dig those holes."

"Sir, you don't have to explain to them..."

"No, no, no. His Majesty once said something that I can't agree more. He calls it pro... proactivity. Right, that's the word!" Kencury clapped his hand. "It roughly means that once a person knows the reason behind his labor, he'll become more productive. So, listen carefully... These holes will determine whether we can live here in the future! These holes..." He paused for a second and then continued, "are the key to converting seawater to drinking water!"

The group immediately stirred up at these words.

"The mechanism behind this is very simple, but only King Roland thought of it. It's just like boiling water—we are going to first feed these holes with seawater. Once the water is heated up by the sun and turns into water vapor, we collect them to get pure drinking water." Kencury even used his hands to further explain the matter, "It's OK you don't understand. You just view the ocean as a giant pool of bitter water saturated with salt. If we can separate the salt from the water, the whole Swirl Sea will become our drinking water source!"

Simbady was rooted to the ground. He doubted if this project was realistic. Put aside the validity of the theory in the latter half of his speech. He wondered how they were going to collect such intangible things as water vapor.

Kencury clenched his fist. "The production will naturally be very limited. One rectangle can only provide water for a dozen people. Therefore, we have to build a large number of conversion sheds to supply water for hundreds of workers here! You should all feel lucky, for His Majesty pays special attention to the construction plan of Endless Cape. This is also the second town named by the

king other than Neverwinter. To celebrate the unification of the Southernmost Region, His Majesty endowed the town with the name 'Festivity', and you guys are not only the builders of Festive Harbor but also the first residents who settled down here!"

Chapter 804: An Accident at the Snow Mountain

As soon as Lightning returned to her tent at the campsite, she took off her goggles, peeled off her gloves, and put her frozen, numb hands above the brazier.

Her fingers soon started to tingle.

Although it had been almost half a month since winter had ended, flurries of snow persisted without any sign of turning lighter. On the contrary, it grew increasingly heavy. Every time Lightning returned from an investigation, her hair was drenched with melted snow, and it always took a while before sensations came back into her skins.

After her hands were a bit warmer, Lightning placed a stool next to the brazier, took off her soggy leather boots, and cocked her feet above the blazes. She could clearly see a wisp of white steam stream out of the tip of her socks. A tinge of warmth went through her cold toes. She was a little abashed by the smell of her feet. Having worn the same boots for such a long time, it was natural that the feet gave off some odor.

Now she understood why her father always stressed that a great explorer should be supported by a great team. Had the First Army not set up the brazier or made hot water aforetime, she would not have been able to fully dedicate herself to the exploration. Her burning enthusiasm for exploration would definitely be quenched by the frustrating thought that she had to lit a fire and boil water herself after returning to the campground, all soaked and exhausted.

Lightning thought perhaps, only King Roland's team had the capability to supply hot water 24 hours a day. Her father had once told her in one of his adventure stories that it was indeed very difficult to have a hot water bath in midwinter. The obstacles lay

in dampened wood, rotted leaves covered by snows, and the time and effort to collect those materials. As such, most of the time his crew members would thoroughly cleanse their bodies only after they fulfilled their undertaking.

But the machines invented by His Majesty completely solved these problems. As the campsite was not far away from the riverbank, the boilers on the three concrete boats, which had been in operation since the first day of their arrival, were able to continuously provide the camp with hot water. If she required hot water, she just needed to take a bucket to fetch some.

The same applied to food.

A peculiar concrete boat was responsible for food supplies for the whole team. The upper floor of the boat constituted a mobile kitchen, where a large amount of oatmeal was cooked every day with the steam produced by the boiler. They ate the oatmeal with some dried meat and salted fish, so much better than tasteless solid food.

It was probably the best logistics team in the world by her father's standard.

After her hands and feet became warm again, Lightning took out her notebook and began to write journal entries.

"Spring, 16th, we were still digging. The mountain greatly impeded Sylvie's and Margie's abilities, especially Margie's. They had to consume a lot of magic power in order to penetrate thick rocks. Out of safety concerns, we must reserve sufficient magic power to head back to the camp for each operation. As a result, we didn't gain much progress."

"Due to a limitation in the distance, Sylvie could just roughly pick a few directions for Miss Fran to dig. By the way, Miss Fran is a very nice lady despite her misshapen figure. She looks even scarier than Maggie when eating. I really hope that I can, one day, see what she originally looked like."

It had been 13 days since they had arrived at the foot of the snow mountain. The only thing they were positive for now was the existence of a big hollow space, which appeared to be connected by multiple caves, in the mountain. It was hard to successfully find the main cave where the ruin was located, let alone to open a tunnel wide enough for the First Army.

Both she and Maggie could not help much in this respect. They could only put sentries outside the mountain or sneak into those strange caves to investigate the ruptures and crevices that the Magic Ark failed to reach.

Compared with the exploration of the ruin itself, finding a correct path leading to the destination was always the most time-consuming part that often required the most efforts and work.

Just as what her father frequently said, an explorer was always on his way.

Lightning cupped her mouth and exhaled a breath which soon turned into a cluster of white steam in the cold air. She continued to write the followings:

"Last came the latest finding of Lightning, the greatest explorer in Graycastle."

"We spied a long, dark figure underneath the ice at the peak of the Great Snow Mountain. It looked like a huge fish. I had no idea how long it took the creature to grow so big, but it must taste good. It was a pity that Anna didn't come with us. We couldn't break the ice to catch it. Maggie could only leave some scratching marks on the ice with her claws, for it was forbidden to employ explosives at the top of the mountain. We probably have to wait until summer when the snow melts."

At these words, Lightning licked her lips. Because of the exploration, she had not tasted barbequed fish for a long time. Perchance she could fly to Misty Forest with Maggie to get some food before nightfall. She probably also needed to get food for

Wendy so that she would not blame her for her roguishness.

Lightning continued to write, "Further, there was another significant finding. We had noticed some demonic beasts group up to the east of Misty Forest, but His Majesty's city wall should be able to block them."

After writing all these down, Lightning put the sheepskin notebook into a watertight bag and slipped it back into her knapsack. As an explorer, she must record everything she saw on a daily basis. Like a captain's logbook, the journal was not only an explorer's badge of honor but also important references for future explorers. When the owner of the logbook was unfortunately killed in an accident, other explorers would be able to analyze his journal and avoid trodding the same path.

Just at that moment, Lightning heard running footsteps outside the door.

It was Wendy outside her tent.

"Agatha and the others are back." Wendy sounded a little anxious. "We've had an accident. Fran's missing!"

"What?" Lightning rose in surprise. "Missing?"

...

By the time the witches stationed at the campground arrived at the end of the tunnel created by the devouring worm, the soldiers from the First Army had lit a fire and put sentries. They found Agatha and the Taquila witches arguing over something.

Lightning poked her head and gasped. She saw a fathomless hole in front of her, its ceiling and bottom indiscernible. She could only hear the sound of running water coming from above.

A part of the tunnel's edge had collapsed. Lightning took out the Stone of Lighting and bent over. The crack was covered with slimy liquid.

"Did Miss Fran fall from here?"

Edith answered, "Looks like so for now... Sylvie picked the right direction, but Fran was just unlucky. She opened the path leading to the big cave but did not notice the precipice at the front. Then she fell to the bottom."

"Looks like?" Lightning noticed her particular wording.

Edith shrugged. "At that time Sylvie and Margie were searching on the other side, a location where they could exactly see what Fran was doing. According to Sylvie, Fran's magic reaction suddenly disappeared from her sight. I don't really know how your magic power works, but Miss Sylvie's Eye of Magic should be able to see very distant objects, right? Yet when they got here, they couldn't see anything at the bottom."

"Couldn't... see?" The little girl was stunned.

Edith spread out her hands. "They couldn't see the bottom or the devouring worm. There're two possible explanations: one is that the hole is so deep that it goes beyond the visual field of the Eye of Magic. The other is that something has blocked her vision. Either of them omens ill." Edith paused for a moment and looked at the arguing Ice Witch and the others. "What they're arguing about is whether they should dive into the hole to rescue Fran immediately."

Chapter 805: Down the Abyss

Lightning was silent.

She knew Edith was right. If the hole was indeed extremely deep as Edith had described, she could almost predicate the fatality of the fall. If it was because of some intervention of Fran's magic power, the situation would then be even more complicated. There could be a gigantic God's Stone of Retaliation at the bottom, in which case, she foresaw no great treachery. If there was, however, a trap set up by some unknown enemies, it would then be too dangerous for the rescue team.

There was a big chance that those swift sickle monsters and the worm carrier that had once devoured the demon's Blackstone Pagoda were still lurking around the Great Snow Mountain. Without any alerts from Nightingale and Sylvie or the protection of the First Army, even the God's Punishment Witches found it hard to bring Fran back safe and sound.

The little girl took a deep breath.

Exploration was essentially a risky business.

A good explorer should save his companion no matter under what circumstances.

She thus came up to the arguing witches and said, "Let me take a look down there. However we're going to do that, we have to first know what's going on before taking the next step."

A blond man turned around and asked, "Your ability is..." Lightning remembered he was called Elena. Although she looked like a man by her appearance, the soul beneath the shell was literally an ancient witch from Taquila.

Lightning tapped her goggles on the head. "Flying. Judging from the current situation, I believe I'm better at scouting than you."

Agatha frowned. "This isn't a matter of convenience. How are

you going to head back if you can't apply your ability at the bottom of the cave? His Majesty said nobody should act alone in this operation, whether she's a witch from the Witch Union or Taquila. Everybody should work together and cooperate with the First Army."

"Tie a rope around my waist then." Lightning disclosed all her plan. "Even if there's really an anti-magic zone created by a God's Stone of Retaliation, as long as you pull me up after I reach the bottom, there shouldn't be a problem."

To save a companion did not mean acting recklessly. Her father had told her numerous stories regarding horrible emergencies when she had been little. Lightning believed that most accidents would end up well as long as they took proper measures.

Because she was the greatest explorer even without her magic power!

Nightingale intercepted, "Let me go with her. I can walk along the precipice easily, for there's no upside or downside in the misty world. Even if an enemy does emerge, I can come to her aid immediately."

Wendy shook her head vigorously. "That would be as dangerous as acting alone. If there's a trap down there, you two guys won't be able to save yourselves. Don't forget that there're formidable enemies like Senior Demons in this world."

"We'll never abandon Fran. If you don't go, I'll go myself!" Elena blurted out in a low voice.

"Have you forgotten to obey orders after 400 years?" There's a faint starchiness in Agatha's voice. "In the name of the Taquila senior witches, I forbid you to act alone!"

"..." Hearing this, all the God's Punishment Witches fell silent. Elena bit her lip. At length, she stepped a few paces back and made an apology by placing her hand on the chest.

"You don't need to argue about it." Edith ventured. "His Majesty instructed that we three parties must work together. Therefore, we just need to send the First Army down there, don't we?"

"Did you find the way there?" Brian, the superintendent of the First Army, asked in surprise.

"No, but I found this." Edith pointed to the cliff closed to the entrance. In the torchlight, the reflective light specks on the river splintered up into flickering glimmers as the water ran. "There should be some lifting equipment on the concrete boat used to make oatmeal, for I often see the soldiers transport food from the supply boat through a crane. They don't do it manually."

"Ah... that's the gondola." Brian nodded. "It can transport a lot of goods at a time, but it requires a steam engine."

"So, we just need to move the machine here from the boat and send two machine gun squads down there along with the witches," Edith stressed each syllable with a stroke. "The length of the rope can be adjusted through a connector; the God's Punishment Witches shall have no problem in handling heavy machines. The water here can guarantee a constant operation as well as a retreat route required by His Majesty. The only question is how to take it down. I believe the First Army shall know how to do it, right?"

Brian replied hesitatively, "We definitely can take it down, but it's hard to put it back..."

Edith raised her brows. "Then you'll only lose a boat and a steam engine, which totals no more than 500 or 600 gold royals. What choice do you think His Majesty would make if he were you?"

Lightning twitched her lips. 500 or 600 gold royals was absolutely not a small number.

It did not take long for Brian to make his decision. He soon gave a nod of approval and said, "I see. You'll soon find a steam engine ready to go."

...

An hour later, a roaring machine appeared at the entrance to the hole. As they found it hard to fix the arm of the gondola to the rocks, they abandoned this part of the device in the end but only used a capstan as the lifting apparatus. The capstan rotated swiftly as the flywheel of the steam engine moved. It thus dropped the rope down the hole little by little. In order to prevent chafe, Agatha summoned her power and wrapped the mouth of the hole with solid ice so that the rope could move up and down without rubbing against the cliff.

A huge iron basket, which could at least carry six to eight people and two Mark I type HMGs, was attached to the end of the rope. In that case, the witches would be still well protected by the powerful machine gun squads even if they lost fighting capacities.

Agatha, Elena, and six soldiers from the First Army crawled into the basket first, followed by Lightning and Nightingale.

After testing out the lifting equipment, everybody slowly sank into the deep hole. The torchlight above became increasingly dismal.

Lightning hovered somewhere a little below the center of the hole to lead the way, with a rope around her waist. She felt a little uneasy without Maggie flying beside her, but she knew someone must be stationed outside the snow mountain. In comparison to monitoring demonic beasts, she preferred to uncover the mystery of the underground ruin.

Every time she dropped 10 meters lower, she would turn around to see if everybody was still there.

Darkness swallowed up the meager light of fires lit by the sentries. The only source of light now was the two Stones of Lighting in the basket. In the steady, soft light of the stones, Lightning detected two pale golden "ribbons" running along the cliff. They were the ice created by Agatha. The solid ice smoothed

out the protruding rocks, making them as reflective as a mirror, and thus ensured them a safe ride down to the bottom.

Lightning's heart gradually sank after she flew for a few hundred meters.

An ordinary man would hardly survive such a long drop. She now only hoped that the devouring worm could be stronger than that.

Just at that moment, Lightning noticed a strange reflection underneath.

The light was hardly perceptible. It was merely a thin thread of flickers like an eye that suddenly opened in the darkness. Lightning signaled the rest of the party with the Stone of Lighting. She plunged into the hole while holding her breath, after which, she stepped on a solid, smooth rock.

Lightning bent over and gently touched the "ground". The gleamy black rock was as polished and glassy as a crystal. Its dark reflection was mixed with a thick cluster of a bright red color...

She had seen this.

It was the giant Blackstone Pagoda in the Devil's Town.

Chapter 806: An "Egg"

"It looks like that the worm found its lair." As soon as the basket reached the ground, Agatha glanced about the surroundings while holding the Stone of Lighting. The furrow between her brows deepened. She asked, "Did you see Fran?"

"Miss Fran isn't here." Lightning had inspected every corner of the cave. "The Blackstone Pagoda seems to be stuck in here. There're some empty spaces on either side of the tower. Could she fall off the top and roll over to the side?"

The diamond-shaped stone tower spanned across the deep hole like a bridge, with its two ends rooted in the rocks. Nobody knew how it ended up like that. The tentacle demon and the Multi-eyed Demon could not be found anywhere either.

"The tower doesn't affect my magic power," Nightingale revealed herself from the mist.

"But you can't walk through it like you walk through a wall, can you?" Agatha squatted down and produced an ice piton. She threw it toward the Blackstone Pagoda. The ice piton immediately broke to pieces, whereas the stone tower remained intact. "There's a rumor saying that this tower is made of God's Stones of Retaliation. Although it won't affect magic power on a mass scale like the prism of magic stone, it can block it."

Elena corrected Agatha in a low tone, "It's not made of God's Stones of Retaliation but it creates them. Corrosive magic power can change the mineral vein of the magic stones and thereby shapes them into a rectangle stone tablet. Only the mineral vein born under the Bloody Moon, however, has the capability to create Red Mist. The others simply help slow down the dissipation of the Red Mist. This was a top secret in the Union age. We learned it from Lady Eleanor after the fall of Taquila."

Nightingale was displeased at the delay of the information. "Why

didn't you tell us earlier?"

Elena snapped, "You didn't tell me there's going to be a demon spire. There're so many things that can possibly affect magic power. How am I supposed to know which one it is?"

Lightning flew in between them and intercepted their confrontational conversation. "We have to keep going down, as we haven't got to the bottom yet. I just managed to dive a little bit more and heard distant running water. It's very likely that there's an underground river down there. If Miss Fran did fell down from the side of the stone tower, she might still be alive."

Elena's voice brightened. "Really? Is it possible that Sylvie didn't find Fran because of this underground river?"

Agatha nodded. "Very likely. As the stone tower has blocked most of the vision of the Eye of Magic, Sylvie couldn't see the bottom. If Fran was flushed down by the water, naturally she couldn't detect her magic beam." She then turned to Lightning and said, "You fly up to tell Wendy first. Ask her to instruct Margie to send some God's Punishment Witches down here... as well as the soldiers from the First Army. Advise them to also put sentries here. We'll continue with our search."

The little girl nodded. "Alright, leave it to me."

...

With the help of the gondola and the Magic Ark, they soon had enough people to rescue Fran.

Lightning took advantage of this interval and thoroughly investigated the area below the Blackstone Pagoda. As she had expected, the vertical cave wall soon moved into a sloping position. The air also dampened. After she descended for another 30 to 40 meters, she saw a wide underground river.

Snow water trickled down the cave wall and pooled before cascading into a thundering waterfall that poured down in torrents

from the mouth of the cave. When the little girl drew close, she could feel a crisp chill play upon her cheeks.

As a result of the moist air in the cave, at the bottom of the hole grew various mosses and mushrooms, one of which gleamed a ghostly blue light that lit up the surrounding area. Even without a Stone of Lighting, Lightning could clearly spy the outline of the cave. With the fireflies floating about, the underground area looked like an entirely different world.

When the ark took the witches and the Taquila survivors to the bottom, they were all fascinated by what they saw.

Nightingale exclaimed, "If only we can grow those glowing fruit in Neverwinter. In that case, everybody can clearly see the road at night."

"Let's bring some back and grow them!" Lightning rubbed her hands in excitement. To discover and grow some new species was one of the most common enterprises for explorers. Sugar canes and corns, for instance, were brought to the Fjords from other small islands by explorers and later flourished. Lightning was not sure if these giant mushrooms and illuminating cattail fruits would be as sweet and delicious as bird beak mushrooms.

Agatha started a head count. "Let's finish our business here first. Margie, you stay here to help the First Army to establish a sentry post. We'll continue with the procession along the underground river. If Fran is more than two miles away from us, we'll pitch some temporary tents."

Nobody made an objection. Lightning, Nightingale and Agatha all knew how to escape and protect themselves. The 10 God's Punishment Witches led by Elena were all exceptional combatants as strong as Extraordinaries. They did not constitute a huge group, but it was actually the most powerful combination in the united front.

Once in the limestone cave, the roar of the rushing water rang off

the rocks and down the underground river, producing thunderous reverberation. Lightning had to keep a close distance with the group so as to hear everybody.

Agatha asked, "Can the devouring worm swim?"

Elena shook her head. "Nobody has seen it swim. But the worm is colossal, so I think it shouldn't be far away from the deep hole even if it was flushed downstream."

"Are you able to tell where this river comes from and head?" Another God's Punishment Witch put in. Lightning vaguely remembered that her name was Zooey.

Nightingale answered, "If I remember correctly, it comes toward us and heads to the snow mountain. In other words, it's a water vein from the Western Region heading to the hilly area in the south."

It was a known fact that there was plenty of underground water in His Majesty's domain, but Lightning wondered why those rivers ran toward the south, for there was not a single river there. She was curious where all those water went.

Suddenly, she saw something flutter on the rock not far away.

"Hang on, I saw something move there!"

Hearing her warning, everybody halted and drew out their weapons.

Nightingale immediately gave an affirmative answer. "No magic reaction is detected, but there's indeed something over there..." She then paused and slowly approached the object. "It looks like a semi-spherical... egg?"

"What?" Agatha was a bit surprised.

"Since it doesn't have magic power, it poses no threat to us." Elena waved at the God's Punishment Witches coming with her and said, "Follow me."

They soon successfully surrounded the egg. When Lighting made a close study of the tremulous egg, however, she knitted her brows.

A layer of gray skin was clinging to the rock, completely blending with the surrounding environment. When she held up the Stone of Lighting and gradually approached the skin, she spied many stomas opening and shutting as if it were breathing.

Elena coughed out a spittle. "What the hell... is this? It's gross."

"If it's really an egg, how big should its parent be?" Lightning roughly measured the area of the skin with her fingers and concluded that it was about three meters in length and width. The swollen part in the middle could almost house a full-grown dairy cow.

"The shape... No, it can't be..." Zooey took a sharp intake of breath. She drew out her longsword and gave the skin a fierce stab, after which she pulled the steel upwards.

A large amount of slimy liquid gushed out of the "egg" as a piercing shriek rang off the cave wall. Then they saw a black shadow come out of the swell and collapsed to the ground.

To Lightning's dismay, it was a Mad Demon.

Chapter 807: Inside the Ruins

Almost at the same time, the entire "skin" shrunk and rolled, and a worm climbed out of the stone wall. With runny mucus pouring out of its skin, it then quickly climbed towards the top of the cave.

But Nightingale was much faster.

She suddenly appeared from the Mist and hung upside down on the cave ceiling as agilely as she was on flat ground and blocked the worm's way ahead. Before falling to the ground, she stabbed a shining dagger into the worm's head and nailed it firmly to the stone wall.

The worm struggled for a while, and then all of its six legs drooped. It was dead.

At that moment, Lightning finally noticed that the "egg" was merely the worm's torso. With its head and legs buried in stones and blocked by its giant belly, its torso did look like an egg.

The worm's figure was out of proportion. Its front part resembled an enlarged ant, with the length of no more than half a meter. Its rear part, namely the "skin" part that enveloped the Mad Demon, was big enough to hold three large barrels inside. Although over a half of the mucus had spilled out and the swollen "skin" had shrunken, its area was still astonishing.

"Is the demon born out of its belly?" the little girl asked in surprise.

"I've never heard of something like that." Agatha crouched and carefully studied the demon under the light of a Magic Stone. "This Mad Demon... is completely mature. Look at its arm. The scar here is caused by the inlay of a Magic Stone. Its girth is larger than the other arm, meaning the demon had constantly thrown pikes with magic power."

"Then where is the Magic Stone?"

"No idea. It's probably been taken away."

"So was it taken by this worm?" Elena asked impatiently. "It swallowed the demon and digested it while hanging itself on the wall. Unfortunately, it came across us. Its Magic Stone was either digested by itself or lost during a war. Does this make sense? Don't worry about this disgusting worm, looking for Fran is more urgent."

"It swallowed the demon?" Lightning questioned in her heart. "Its mouth is not big enough for an adult human being to go through, not to mention for a strong Mad Demon of nearly three meters tall."

"That's weird..." Nightingale's voice came from the void. "Obviously it's dead, but why didn't its magic power dissipate until now?"

"What?" Agatha was surprised. "Do you mean this is a demon?"

"Yes, its magic power is as thin as mist. I didn't notice it until it rolled out of the worm's belly. But it's surely dead. Judging from the decomposition level of its skin, it died one or two days ago." Nightingale then asked with bewilderment, "I thought that it was impossible for magic power to gather on a dead body?"

"If you saw it right, it is indeed weird..." Zooey nodded. Inserting the sword deep into the stone wall, she then said, "Perhaps we should take these two bodies back for further investigation. Let's leave a mark here and collect them when we finish camping."

As they walked forward, they ran across more "egg worms", and again, though not all were buried under the stone wall, some were standing right beside the river bank or were in a cluster like mushrooms.

Being experienced, the witches could now make sure their strikes hit right at the worms' crucial points or cut their heads off, which were buried under the dirt, one after another. Cutting open the

worms' bellies, they found that there were not only Mad Demons inside, but also Fearsome Demons and human bodies.

That startled the witches.

Beyond the Border Area, there was no human residence. How did the worms hunt humans?

Could it be that the worms had stretched their legs into the domain of Neverwinter without a trace?

At that moment, Nightingale suddenly alerted, "There is a magic reaction ahead. Wait, no... is that, Fran?"

"Where?" Elena did not rush forward, but fanned out with the other God's Punishment Witches, holding their swords and guarding all around.

Lighting understood that in the misty world, everything was black and white, and most of the objects she saw were constituted by visualized and twisted silhouette lines, except the magic power, which was in bright colors. That was why the dark underground environment had no influence on Nightingale.

"Front-left, 200 meters... about 400 steps. She seems to be entangled by something." Nightingale's voice went further and further and was blurred under the noise of water sprays. "I can't see... I'll go first... Wait!"

A moment later, two gunshots sounded.

"Bang! Bang!"

The firing of the flintlock sounded particularly loud under the ground. The God's Punishment Witches took a look at one another and walked forward while maintaining their formation. Lightning was faster. She flew over them and toward the gunshots while firmly holding the revolver in her hand.

Luckily, what she had worried about did not happen. Soon, Nightingale held up the Stone of Lighting to guide the way.

Lying under the witches feet were two monsters with sickle-like forepaws. The flintlock shots made two holes on the worms heads and blue blood flew on the ground.

"Are these the demonic beasts that you mentioned which can hide their figures?" Floating in midair, Lightning asked.

"Yes, but no matter how skillful they are, they can't hide from my eyes." Nightingale put away her revolver and patted at Fran who was tightly stuck, she asked, "Am I right?"

Fran struggled a bit and groaned something, but it seemed that her mouth was sealed.

Nightingale noticed that both sides of the worm carrier were winded with white jelly which firmly fixed Fran on the ground. Her giant mouth was blocked too. Other than that, her strong body was full of wounds. Apparently, when she fell out of the deep hole, it hurt her badly.

Furthermore, to Nightingale's surprise, there was more than one such giant worm. Another two devouring worms quietly lay on the ground, as if they were in deep sleep.

"Is this..." An idea flashed into Lightning's mind. She quickly landed and pushed aside the moss on the ground. A mottled slate appeared in sight.

"Oh?" Nightingale whistled. "Nice, it seems that we've found..."

"The legendary snow mountain ruin!" she said with excitement.

"What happened?" The others arrived one after another. In order not to stretch their formation too loosely, the God's Punishment Witches had moved at a fixed speed. Walking in the front had always been Elena, which slightly changed Lightning's opinion on her.

"I've found Fran, and two monsters who seemed to want to make a meal out of her," Nightingale explained briefly. "Fran is alright, but stuck on the ground. This is already part of the underground

ruins, which means enemies could be around. Let's take Fran out of here as soon as possible and call the First Army to set up sentry posts."

Elena nodded, pulled out the heavy sword on her back, and neatly and quickly cut open those resilient jelly things. When Fran's giant mouth regained its freedom, everybody heard her low growling.

"Don't look up!"

When Lighting heard it, she had subconsciously raised her head.

It was pitch-black overhead, nothing could be seen at first sight. At this spot, the cave extended upward, creating an enormous dome-like space. The Stone of Lighting could only illuminate a very limited space on the ground, offering no detailed vision atop. The next moment, Nightingale felt that the fine hairs on her body rose up.

In the darkness, appeared one scarlet eye, then two eyes, three eyes...

She did not know how many eyes were staring at her at that moment. She saw those tens of thousands of eyes, like tens of thousands of stars, cohere into a gigantic red plate... which looked like a "Bloody Moon".

Chapter 808: Close Quarter Combat

"Did you hear any sound?" Edith looked at Brian who was instructing the soldiers to arrange an underground defense line.

"Any sound?" Brian stopped what he was doing, looked around in puzzlement, and said, "No, Miss Edith, I haven't heard anything except the sound of running water."

"Really?" Edith frowned. "Am I mistaken?"

"What kind of sound was that?"

"Like the sound of a horn, very muffled... similar to the sound of water," Edith paused. "It seemed to come from the south."

That was the direction where the witches went for a deep exploration. The turbulent underground river went from north to south, and disappeared in the pitch-black underground cave. Although there were weird illuminating plants on both sides of the river, they could not provide light for far away places. The entire waterway was like an entrance to an abyss which devoured everything she saw.

"That... I think probably because we're deep in the mountain, which deprives us the vision of the sky, plus the lack of the light of a fire, you might be hallucinating." Brian smiled thoughtfully. "For the soldiers who have been to a battlefield, this isn't a big problem. It's no wonder that you might feel nervous. If you feel uneasy, Miss Margie can accompany you to return to the aisle exit."

A familiar look, familiar words... Edith was not surprised by the speech of the Gun Battalion commander. Although she was in light leather armor and a helmet, with a walking sword hanging on her waist, most of the people there still took her as an observer from the City Hall, or... as a pearl-like girl, just like her title, pretty and fragile. That was also the reason why people cared and pleased her all the way.

What those people did not understand was that the pearls produced by the giant clams in the Northern Region had been soaked in blood.

The blood of fish, of water beasts... or even of the fishermen.

That was why they could grow so big, into the size of a fist.

Roland Wimbledon was probably the only one who ignored her appearance in the beginning and even took her as an opponent.

"Thanks, but I'm better off here. If I run back, doesn't it mean I'll humiliate His Majesty's City Hall?" Although Edith did not tell Brian what was in her mind, she rejected his suggestion with a smile. For a moment, Brian was lost in her smile. After a long while, he shunned away in embarrassment.

"I don't think His Majesty or Barov would mind it..." Brian coughed twice. "I just don't understand why you came with the First Army to such a dangerous place?"

"For only in this way could you trust me," Edith said frankly.

"W... What?"

"You must have heard of the Battle of Divine Will," she said calmly. "When such a battle that determines human's lives comes, it'd be hard for His Majesty to consider every aspect of the war situation. He'll need many officers to assist him to command the army, and the army will depend on the City Hall for logistics. By that time, will you trust an officer who has fought with you shoulder by shoulder or one who sits in the office every day dealing with paperwork?"

Brian was startled. After a moment, he said, "You're really brave to make such a speech."

Edith understood what he was referring to. Even an indigenous former Patrol Leader understood what she meant. At best, what she wanted to do was called assistant commanding... or it could be called power interference, which was totally unbearable in the eyes

of other lords who claimed total control of their knights.

But now, the number of soldiers of the First Army had exceeded 5000, so the knightage's management method was obviously outdated. As a matter of fact, the Adviser Department assembled by His Majesty was an organization between the army and the City Hall, which was eventually under Roland's control but the commanding right underneath would further spread. Because Edith understood Roland's ideas, she dared to make that speech. It was not that she intended to join the Adviser Department, but she wanted to extend her influence as much as possible.

"If it was any other kings, I'd definitely not do that, but His Majesty is different..." Edith said, smiling, "You know that it was me who proposed that anyone who wants to be promoted in City Hall needs to go to a battlefield first. This being said, it's better that I set an example for the others."

"Has His Majesty... agreed?"

"Not really, but he didn't object to it."

"Um, doesn't it mean that he agreed?" Brian asked confusedly.

"In politics, you can't interpret things this way," Edith said with her hands laid out. "Even an oral commitment may change anytime before it gets written down, let alone the silence the king gave me for my asking."

"I see..." The Gun Battalion commander said with mixed feelings, "Politics is really complicated."

"That's true."

Apart from that, she also planned to get closer to the witches, to understand their abilities and characters, and to spend more time with them.

Undoubtedly, His Majesty had exerted big efforts on the witches, and the construction of Neverwinter could not carry on without the witches. To reach the peak of power, she would need their

support.

So far, her plan had gone very smoothly. Probably because they were the same gender, her contact with the witches did not draw their rejection, yet Barov was not that lucky.

"Are the God's Punishment Witches the next batch to come?" Edith changed the subject.

"Yeah, I think so. Miss Margie can only deliver five to six people per time. To set a sentry post, she would have to run about 10 times," Brian replied accordingly. "Where do you think the second machine gun should be positioned?"

"Somewhere high... Um, I remember there is a suitable location near the rock behind..." Right when she turned around to observe the cave behind her, an illuminating plant seemed to distort in a certain way, as if something broke the stability of the air, making everything look blurry.

"What's that?" she asked.

Before she could alert the First Army soldiers, the air was again acutely distorted. This time the air behind the machine gun squad members rippled.

A light sound came, then a soldier's head fell off his neck, with a smile frozen on his face.

"Enemy attack!" Edith shouted out, "It's invisible!"

Almost at the same time, two more soldiers' chests were pierced through. When their blood spurted, the ripple was dyed red.

"There is more than one!"

Edith thought swiftly. Throwing a dagger with one hand toward the place where the first soldier fell, she pulled out her sword and raced to the enemy. When her dagger was knocked away by the invisible thing, she pricked her sword to the root of the ripple from another angle.

Edith clearly knew that if they chose to retreat, they would end up being attacked from front and back. There was a bonfire at this place, which was their only source of light to find the enemies' whereabouts. Without light, they could find no way to resist these nearly invisible monsters, so escaping should be their last choice!

While they could roughly locate the enemies, offense was their only chance to win!

Through the sword-tip came a sense of softness, as if it was pricked into some skin and flesh, which thrilled Edith.

If she was not wrong, whether humans or beasts, the contacting point of a weapon and a body was definitely a weakpoint—such as a hand holding a sword or a tip of a claw, which if hurt, would not regain its attacking ability in anytime soon.

Just as Edith was about to draw back her sword, a chilly wind swept towards her from another direction, coming at a speed that was so fast that she felt coldness hitting right on her face.

"Damn it! This thing has two weapons?"

Years of experience in fighting and killing made her subconsciously loosen the sword-holding righthand and roll on the ground. At that moment, she felt something touching the back of her head and then her long hair flew about like fallen petals scattering everywhere.

Having no time to get up, she shouted at Brian, "Now, shoot in my direction."

Chapter 809: The Moment of Crisis

By the time that the soldiers realized what was happening, it was too late for them to adjust another machine gun in order to take aim, so they directly pulled out the revolving rifles tied on their backs to fire at the enemy.

The long sword shoved in the invisible monster's body was now giving away its trail, making it an easy target for it to aim at. At such a short distance, Brian and all the other men fire all their bullets at once. The hail of bullets swept over Edith's head and she could even hear the whoosh sounds as the bullets tore through the air.

She turned back and saw the distorted air had solidified as a monster emerged out of the void. It was bloodcurdling. The monster wore a taupe shell all over and was nearly two meters tall while standing. A height that would allow it to tower over most ordinary men. Apart from a pair of forelegs as sharp as sickles, it also had seven or eight pairs of supportive legs sticking out of its abdomen. Luckily, the bullets were fierce enough to pierce through its shell, and they finally cracked open the monster's thin, long and locust-like head. It twitched a little and fell to the ground, bathed in blood.

"Get out of my way!" Suddenly, someone roared behind Edith.

A heavy sword proceeded the voice, piercing through the air with a strong power that caused the blade to buzz. It smashed right in the space before the first machine gun squad, blowing away the other two monsters and dispelling the invisible rippling air.

Hard on the heels of Ashes' strike, several God's Punishment Witches moved forward to slash the enemies, tearing their bodies into halves before they managed to get to their feet.

"The reinforcements finally arrived." Edith let out a sigh of relief as she realized it.

The enemies had lost their advantage of invisibility, plus with their small numbers, it had not taken long before the Transcendent Warriors dismembered all of them.

Edith noted that as the monsters inched nearer to the God's Punishment Witches, their form turned weird, half of their body invisible in the void while the other half was revealed in the light as if their hiding skills had been abated.

"Are you alright?" Margie pulled Edith to her feet. "We spotted these enemies on the cliff and moved as fast as we could, but we're still a little too late."

"You spotted them with the colorful Magic Stone?"

"Yes." Another tall man came up to her. "Weapons of common people don't work well in this kind of situation. You'd better inform the people above to bring more God's Punishment Witches down here."

Edith remembered her name was Betty. She asked, "You're capable of destroying their camouflage?"

"It's a trick that works the same way as the God's Stone of Retaliation." The man shrugged. "So far, it can only deactivate their invisibility skill for a short period of time."

"But they also wear God's Stone of Retaliation. How could they not see the enemy?" Brian asked with his teeth gnashed, as he looked at the three dead men on the ground.

"It's not surprising," Betty answered calmly. "For light, distance, and attention will all affect our sights. A general God's Stone works only within the area of one or two paces. Since the enemies only exposed in our visions for less than a second, it was reasonable that they couldn't see the targets, not to mention in such a dim place."

Edith could not help sighing. Betty was right. They had not noticed the sickle monsters until they showed their half bodies during the fight. The beasts' long forelegs and invisibility skills

had given them a great advantage. It was undoubtedly too late for ordinary people to react, even though they had sensed something wrong. There would have been no way for the First Army to defeat them unless they had buried God's Stones beforehand to give them a clearer view to see through the enemies' disguises.

"Damn it!" Brian wielded his fist fiercely. "I should have sent down the wire netting first!"

"I think we should go back. I have a feeling that something unpleasant is going to happen in the hole," Betty urged again. "The weird shriek almost startled the entire snow mountain."

"Did you hear that too?" Edith asked in surprise.

"Losing most of our sense of touch has made our eyes and ears extraordinarily sharp..." Betty studied Edith for a little while before replying. "I didn't expect that a common person would be capable of hearing the sound too."

Sure enough, it was not her illusion to hear the sound. Edith nodded as she removed her God's Stone of Retaliation and threw it next to the machine gun. She and the other men gathered around Margie who weaved the Magic Ark. Together they descended to the bottom and then ascended along the steep wall. Brian, the leader of the Gun Battalion, was slightly reluctant to hand over the frontline to the Taquila witches, but had to follow the trend. After all, once the God's Punishment witches were involved in the fight, they could not ignore the witches and fire at the enemies recklessly.

The men who were stationed at the Blackstone Pagoda were unclear of the details of the battle at the bottom of the hole, so they kept sending down equipment such as tents, God's Stones, guns and ammunition etc. After Brian commanded the soldiers to stop transporting, they did not transfer to the vacant steam-engine-powered elevator but continued to ride the Ark to ascend.

Just as they were approaching the worm passage, a hail of gunfire broke out above them, causing a sound as if a mighty storm

were striking. That meant that the First Army which was guarding at the sentry post, had opened fire without leaving themselves a loop-hole.

Their faces changed. Margie pumped up all of her power to accelerate the Ark.

As the Magic Ark dashed out of the hole, Edith could not help widening her eyes.

Body parts were showering down from the upper cave. Three machine gun squads that were lined up in one formation were firing at the pitch-dark ceiling of the cave under Sylvie's command. The revolvers and precision shooting squad concentrated on handling the blind corners above them, firing at the cave wall without taking aim.

"What are you fighting against?" Brian caught one man and asked.

"Demonic beasts, my lord!" the man reported as he was loading ammunition. "A pack of demonic beasts charged down from snow mountain!"

"Damn it! Why do they bother us at this time?"

A thought suddenly flashed through Edith's mind.

"Could the muffled buzz be the sound of it summoning its own kind?"

It was something she had read from His Majesty's book, a unique sound in this world that was inaudible to the human ear but was particularly clear to some creatures. Some species were even able to make such sounds to help them communicate with each other in their own way. Was it possible that the sound they had heard was a kind of signal between the same species?

However, Misfortunes did not come alone. When Brian was watching the battle, one man ran in and reported to him, "My lord, Lady Maggie spotted the abnormal trail of demonic beasts in the

east to Misty Forest. They seemed to be marching on the snow mountain, moving towards Neverwinter as we expected."

"What? This..." The leader of Gun Battalion was stunned for a moment.

"My lord?" the man asked urgently. "What do we do?"

"How can this... How can this be..." Brian muttered repeatedly, his face grim, his forehead sweaty.

Edith frowned at Brian's inexperienced behavior. In her view, a leader should never wear a bewildered look openly, especially in front of his men.

"Ahem," she interrupted, "things are simpler than you think. First, if we summon back the First Army deployed outside the snow mountain and gather them to guard the cave, the battlefield will be much smaller and only a few machine guns will be needed to stifle the attack of the demonic beasts."

Brian turned to look at her. It took him a long while, but he managed to compose himself. "Exa-Exactly," he stuttered.

"Second, tell Lady Maggie to contact His Majesty and ask for reinforcements, just in case. After all, our ammunition and food are supplied through Redwater River. Once we give up the entrenched passage, our battle couldn't last long because of the lack of replenishment." Edith said calmly and clearly. "The beasts can't swim, so we should keep the cement ships and deploy a dozen of men who will help to pin down the enemy as well as guide the reinforcements."

"Lady Sylvie'll be responsible for annihilating the demonic beasts on the ceiling of the cave. Temporarily, we should collect everyone's God's Stones and bury them at the sentry post in case of sneak attack from the enemy. Lastly, remember to send the Taquila witches to the bottom of the hole to support Betty so that she'll have enough men to march on the south of the riverway to

look for Agatha and the other witches." Edith's composed voice eased the tension and discomposure among the crowd. "We must send the witches to Betty as soon as possible. If I'm not wrong, the source of the weird sound will be the key to solving our problem."

Brian inhaled deeply and said, "I see. Let's do as you suggested."

Chapter 810: A Dilemma

"Uh... I feel so... disgusting."

Agatha covered her mouth and retched as she crept along the worm carrier's narrow esophagus to get out. "I feel like I was in some kind of mucus-filled bag that was flung onto the wall dozens of times."

"You couldn't find any words better than that?" Nightingale asked as she walked out of her Mist leisurely. She stared at the others who were bathed in mucus. "If Fran hadn't collapsed the cave's mouth, we'd be in great danger." The advantage of walking in the Mist, that enabled her to travel seamlessly between spaces, had saved her from needing to hide in the carrier's stomach. Ultimately saving her from being bathed in the foul and corrupted mucus.

"Sorry... did I act impulsively?" Fran asked warily, however, Agatha was too busy retching from the stench to reply.

"For me, it was okay." Lightning said as she wiped mucus from her hair before smelling it. "Being swallowed by a giant worm and then crawling out safely is an unparalleled experience, an adventure that no other explorers have gotten to taste."

"Don't be too greedy." Elena rolled her eyes and said to Agatha, "For us, who have no senses, even smelling the reek and feeling the clammy touch is enviable."

Other God's Punishment Witches echoed her sentiment.

"Fine... let us say no more." Agatha coughed and interrupted in a hoarse voice, "On to the next problem, what should we do?"

There was fear lingering in every witch's heart as they recalled the accident from minutes ago. Despite Fran's quick warning, in that moment, the instinct to turn their eyes towards the source of the weird buzzing was faster than their minds could process the

warning. As a result, more than one of them failed to keep their head down as the sound rang out.

No one had been able to see the actual visage of the monster, all they could see was it's ten thousand scarlet eyes.

They believed that the cluster of eyes belonged to the watchful Multi-eyed Demon that had coiled on the top of the tower. The only image they could associate it with was the black stone tower that had been swallowed by the worm. However, unlike the ordinary Multi-eyed Demon, the scope of this one's eyes had been much wider, as if the demon's body had been flattened and considerably stretched.

After the buzzing had subsided a large number of hybrid demonic beasts emerged from the deep ruins and charged towards them. All Nightingale had been able to see while she was in the Mist was the sudden appearance of numerous magic power light spots. They had abruptly appeared out of the void and from every corner of the cave. They had come from the stone walls, the streaming water, and the dark dome. The monsters had gathered together, creating bright streams, and their noisy, raspy roars drowned out the tinkling of the running water. It had been as if the entire mountain had come alive to chase off the intruders.

In that moment of peril, it had been Fran who made the executive decision.

She swallowed everyone, except for Nightingale, and turned so she could bore into the cave wall. Once her whole body had been submerged in the stone wall, the demonic beasts approached and started to snap at her tail fiercely. Even with Nightingale proving cover, she had been able to drive away so many enemies.

Although she had been in pain, Fran persisted and tunneling about 30 feet into the rock formation before she rolled back onto her rear and smashed the demonic beasts with her giant body. Subsequently, she gathered all of her strength into her tail and

whipped it hard against the ceiling of the tunnel, knocking down the stones. By blocking the mouth of the tunnel, she finally eliminated some enemies.

During the struggle, the witches hiding in Fran's stomach had had an unforgettable experience. They tumbled and rocked inside the worm while she was fighting and they nearly threw up. As if the rolling and whipping wasn't enough, they had also been confined next to the rotting meat that was in the digestive cavity and it had reeked.

Ultimately, at least, all of them were safe.

"First we have to figure out what's going on." Elena looked at Fran, "How did you get stuck down here?"

"I think the rock formation must have been eroded by years of water washing so it collapsed abruptly as I twirled in the passage. It all happened so fast that I was already fallen by the time I realized what had happened. Then I knocked into something and blacked out," Fran said limply. "When I woke up, I found myself being transporting by dozens of invisible worms and then they left me in this place."

"I see... They've taken you as a vacant carrier." Elena raised her eyebrows, "At least, we're lucky."

"We're indeed, very lucky, especially since we were not eaten on the spot," Fran muttered. "It's a pity that I accidentally glanced up at the ceiling of the cave when I was about to escape."

"Is it really a watchful Magic Eye?" Agatha asked in a deep voice.

"I don't know. The moment I saw it, it spotted me as well, but I'm not sure what it really was. This monster was much bigger than the Multi-eyed Demon." Fran sighed, exhaling a nasty wind that assaulted the people around her. "Ah, sorry... since Elena and the other God's Punishment witches lost their smell a long time ago, I stopped paying it any attention..."

"Ahem, it's fine." Ice Witch Agatha held her breath for a long time before saying, "Did you happen to get an overall view of the monster?"

"After I had been bound, it landed and took its time as it bathed in the lake..." Fran paused for a moment as she looked for the words. "I don't know how to describe it. The monster looked like a failed experiment, it's like a lump of flattened guts that has been laid over the body of the Multi-eyed Demon. The two parts don't mesh naturally and they look more like a forceful patchwork. I also noticed that it had tentacles writhing in the gaps between the parts. I am not sure if they were living worms or a physical part of the monster. Regardless, that lump of the guts was much larger than the Multi-eyed Demon, even bigger than the Fearful Beast of Hell."

"Is it possible that the monster is consuming demons?" Nightingale frowned, "I believe it can't be considered a simple hybrid demonic beast."

"I think we should figure out how to get out of here before we try to figure out what it is." Elena patted Fran's huge mouth. "Next time, remember to alert us before telling us the details. Do you understand?"

"Um..." Fran answered gloomily.

"Can you move now?"

"I can't. I've run myself out..." Fran shook her head. "I consumed all the food in my stomach during the time we have been trapped here, so I need food for fuel."

"What if we give you the last of our food?" Lightning suggested.

"That's barely enough for her to tunnel 100 steps." Elena took a deep breath, "All we can do is wait or risk it and break out."

"Waiting isn't safe either," Agatha said calmly. "The space in here is too small and we'll all suffocate in less than a day if we don't find

a way out." "Even if Sylvie manages to locate us, they will have to destroy the beasts before they can try to save us." She paused, "Don't forget the enemy also possesses devouring worm carriers."

"Unfortunately, if we charge out now, it's unlikely we won't be devoured by the numerous beasts." The God's Punishment Witches hesitated. "Besides... what do we do about Fran? She can't escape and there's no way for her to defend herself from so many enemies."

"Anyway... let me check the situation outside first." Nightingale turned, unwilling to be involved in this dilemma.

"If you guys figure out a way to escape, don't worry about me," Fran said suddenly. "Taquila witches don't fear death. I'll always belong to them no matter what I've become. By the way, I've got something else in my stomach that may be of some help." She wriggled her body, slowly spitting out several sticky iron boxes.

"What's..."

"The garrison supplies that the First Army asked me to carry," Fran said, coughing. "They said these things were too heavy to carry and asked me for help, so I swallowed all of them."

Agatha opened the boxes one by one—there were building tools and materials in them, such as shovels, spades, wire nettings, etc. As the things in the last box were revealed, Agatha froze for a moment.

The iron box was not very large but it was especially heavy. Apart from the shockproof wheat-straw stuffing, there were a dozen wooden boxes labeled "the second chemistry plant, sample 64, qualified".

If she remembered correctly, most of the nitrogen generated during decomposition had been sent to this factory.

This box actually held explosives.

Chapter 811: Battle in the Mist

"You mean these things are capable of cracking the mountain and the earth?"

Elena widened her eyes after she heard the Ice Witch's concise introduction about the explosives. She condemned angrily, "What if these things explode in Fran's stomach? How could they not think of that?"

Fran's giant body could not help quivering at the thought.

"It's the lab sample that easily explodes," Agatha said as she rummaged through the box for a bag of copper pipe and showed it to Elena, "not these kind of explosives, which won't ignite on ordinary impact or heat. The only way to make them explode is to put these pipes in explosive containers."

The explosives had aroused the other God's Punishment Witches' interest, who had heard of the splendid scene of the artillery exercise long ago from Phyllis, the God's Punishment Witch who they called No. 76. They had witnessed the First Army's battle against the incursion of demonic beasts a few times since moving to the Western Region of Graycastle and were not unfamiliar with gunpowder. But this was their first time to be so close to this kind of weapon.

"Is it really okay to burn it? The thing that can create such a loud sound when it explodes should be very volatile at ordinary times."

"It looks very much like a brick..."

"How to make it work? Does it explode once the copper pipe is put into it?"

"Who dares to do that?"

The questions troubled Agatha too, for she only knew the general principle of those firearms that His Majesty had made. Her knowledge of how to use it was no more than her Taquila fellows.

"The thing with the red mark on it is the detonator that must be ignited for it to work." Lightning suddenly leaned over and said professionally, "The blue-marked one is the detonator that is needed to pull out the string to trigger it. I remember there is another kind of detonator with a yellow mark that will be activated by electric current, but this bag only has the red and blue ones."

That got Agatha amazed, and she blurted out, "How did you know that?"

"Because I'm an explorer!" The young girl touched her nose. "I was basically present at every new weapon test that the First Army held."

"So, should we bury these things in the cave mouth beforehand and blow our way out or cast them along the way as we retreat and carry Fran with us?" Elena tried to work out a solution. "If the explosive could hold back the enemies, I believe 10 God's Punishment Witches are able to move Fran."

"It doesn't matter, leave me behind..."

"Shut up!" Elena cut in. "Even though we're not afraid of sacrifice, we'll never give up our companions easily. Don't forget what Lady Eleanor has told us."

"Every witch is of equal importance." The rest of the people joined in and nodded.

"I'm afraid... neither of your plans work," Lightning muttered. "One bag of explosives is enough to tear us into pieces if you set it to work at the mouth of such a small cave. But if we put the explosives in a larger cave, the explosion will be unsatisfying." She looked at the shovels and spades on the ground and went on, "The explosives should have been used to make caves or open passages. They're not formal weapons, and the fire and air current created in the explosion is only able to kill the beasts within 10 paces."

A silence came over them, who knew that the explosion might be fearsome enough to drive away general beasts, but not the swarm of demonic beasts that were obviously summoned by the monster on the dome of the cave. They'll never stand a chance to get out unless most of those demonic beasts were destroyed.

"Maybe we have one more choice." Nightingale chimed in suddenly. "Bring down their boss."

"You mean... the monster dwelling in the dome?" Elena frowned. "We can't fly."

"Even if you could fly, that's too dangerous!" Agatha said before Lightning found her words. "It's not a defensive battle where we have support whenever we ask. We all know that it's not uncommon that some hybrid demonic beasts are able to fly, and Lightning loses her speed and flying height considerably as long as she's load-bearing, so it's highly possible that she'll never get herself close to the monster once the enemies spot her and besiege her."

"I'm not proposing to make Lightning do it," Nightingale said word by word. "I'm planning to put this bag of explosive into the monster's mouth with my own hand, given it does have a mouth."

"You?" Agatha was shocked. "Don't be ridiculous... You should know that your Mist can't hide anything in front of Magic Eyes. Wherever you see it, it notices you too."

"Its ability to see me doesn't mean that its underlings can notice me. I'm confident that I can get through them, even if they are under their boss's order to intercept me." She paused. "Do remember that the Mist can do much more than concealing."

"But..."

A cacophony coming from the rock formation interrupted Agatha's next words. It sounded as though numerous cicada were eating leaves, or gravel was clashing, being smashed and ground.

The witches' faces changed. The sound was not unfamiliar to them.

"Damn it. They've sent the devouring worm," Elena said with a stern face. "The enemy is coming. Get yourself ready."

A worm carrier was hardly a threat, but as soon as their concealed vantage point was uncovered, they were to be faced with endless demonic beasts that traveled through the worm's stomach.

"Don't worry about me. No one is more competent in this kind of mission. Back at the time when the Witch Cooperation Association was running in the old king's city, my title was well-known everywhere in the central region of the kingdom," Nightingale said as she packed four bags of explosives in her bag and bound it tightly on her back. "At that time, people used to call me 'Shadow Killer'."

"Wait..."

"Rest assured. I'll finish that deformed thing before the worm tunnels its way here."

Before Agatha could say anything to stop her, she disappeared into thin air.

The last sight Agatha had of Nightingale was a thumbs up.

...

In the world of black and white, directions meant nothing to Nightingale, and everywhere would become flat and level if she wished.

It felt as though she was the manipulator of this world where everything was under her order.

Passing through the collapsed stones, she straightway jumped up to the steep cliff and rushed to the dome of the cave.

Suddenly, her vision changed the angle by 90 degrees. The monster that should have been above her hid somewhere was

ahead of her now. The turbulent underground river looked like a ribbon beset on the precipice, while the broad subterranean lake now rose up like a huge window.

By then, she had caught sight of the monster, and it had her in sight as well.

Nightingale did not look away.

With her eyes fixed on the monster's star-like eyes, she sped up to it. In the Mist, the glare radiated from the monster's powerful Magic Cyclone and looked like a bloody moon, outshining the crowded light spots.

This monster could not be a simple hybrid demonic beast, she thought.

Its magic power outperformed even Anna's.

For a moment, Nightingale sensed her mind had been connected with the monster's.

The feeling was chaotic and unspeakable, but she was sure that both of them had received the undisguised hostility from each other.

She grinned.

The monster raised its tentacles.

With a low roar, the demonic beasts in the cave flocked to her.

Chapter 812: Segmentation

Nightingale soon discovered that she was right.

Most demonic hybrid beasts could not locate her, so hardly any beasts could clamber onto the cliff to block her. The flying beasts swooping in the mid-air looked terrifying but always missed her like an arrow that missed its target. As long as she kept moving, it was uneasy for those beasts to hold her back.

The only beasts that could "spot" her were those mutated ones with sickle-shaped forelegs. They writhed their robust bodies and nailed their supportive legs in the stones so that they were able to move about the cliff. Under the command of the monster, they moved towards the dome of the cave, intercepting Nightingale and the alerted Magic Eye.

She had to destroy those beasts before meeting head-on the monster.

The vast dome of the cave had become Nightingale's personal battlefield. Fighting alone had been an experience she had not had for a long time.

She had been walking alone in the Mist in the past and had been forced to serve her wicked aristocratic relatives until Wendy had found her and helped her out of such miseries.

But her feeling at present was dramatically different from the feeling she had had when she had roamed in the Silver City.

Alone she was, she felt no boredom or hatred in the least, for she volunteered to participate in this dangerous duel without being compelled or threatened.

Her mind was saturated with the faith to protect her companions.

Nightingale did not feel alone at all, for she was in the protective suit made by Soraya, with the explosives produced by Agatha in

her bag, and the gun designed by Roland around her waist, which was engraved with the words "To Veronica".

All of these gears gave her a feeling that everyone was fighting alongside her.

As she revolved a multitude of thoughts in her head, the enemies were drawing near. The beasts started to close up, their sickle-shaped forelegs in the air.

There was a total of 16 of them.

Nightingale took out the pistol, pulled the safety, and waited until the nearest beast was within a few paces. Then she went out of the Mist as she pulled the trigger.

The beast lurched to her at the same time.

Its powerful tail and supportive legs enabled them to dash forward. The strike was completed in a split second, as quick as a predator plunging at its prey.

It was more like that the beast struck the bullet itself than the other way around.

Even though the beast was shot, the shockwave of the bullet could still wound Nightingale.

But she had prepared for this.

The moment the bullet left the muzzle, Nightingale re-entered the Mist and stepped onto a fast receding borderline that represented the contour of the earth.

This was perfect timing.

An outsider might think she leaped backward all of a sudden for a few meters; but in fact, it was the ground underneath that was moving backward.

"Bang!"

The bullet smashed into the sickle monster's pointy head and

blew it up. Its shell and brain splashed like a blooming flower. The magic glow dissipated quickly and its invisible body twitched and reappeared. The lifeless beast fell to the subterranean lake like a stone dropping into the water. Yet in Nightingale's eyes, the dead body moved headlong upward, as if it were sucked down to the bottom of the surging lake.

Taking advantage of the changeable lines in the Mist in this way, Nightingale chased and fought against her enemies. Even though the beasts moved very fast, they succumbed to the negative impact of the gravity. When Nightingale lured them into the battlefield on which they had had a fight earlier, they had to slow down to make sure their legs were deeply rooted in the rock, as the previous battle, which had left hundreds of holes in the rocky walls, greatly reduced the friction between their legs and the surface.

But her tactics were not flawless. Because she had to step out of the Mist and expose herself temporarily to fire at the enemy, she had drawn increasing numbers of beasts to her. What was worse, she had become more vulnerable to the flying demonic beasts because those deformed winged monsters had started to hover in the air close to the dome to bide their time, rather than "swoop down" blindly as they did before. When she fired at the enemies, those flying beasts would dodge the bullet so that she had to hide in the Mist again to relocate her target. Sometimes she had to rely on the borderline in the Mist to dodge the massive attacks from the enemies.

Nightingale got injured in less than seven minutes after the battle began.

After all, she could not find a good hiding spot in the Mist every time after she fired. The change of the lines in the Mist was not subject to her will, so the misty world was as perilous to her as to everybody else. A battle of such high intensity was a challenge both to her physical strength and her mentality.

The greatest injury was to her ribs.

She had failed to dodge a strike when being besieged by two flying beasts. Their razor-sharp claws had torn her coat, leaving a deep cut from her flank to her waist. The coated protective suit made by Soraya had saved her from being gutted, but the coating could not block the power of the strike. The pain almost took away her breath, and she had to rest for a long time to recover herself.

Evidently, it was Multi-eyed Demon that manipulated the frantic demonic hybrid beasts, for those hybrid beasts, which were usually prone to fight against each other, actually worked together and launched fierce and continuous attacks this time. That made Nightingale even more determined to destroy the demon. She did not understand why it would rather hide in this Great Snow Mountain than attack Neverwinter. But the demonic beasts with a commander would be a great threat to Prince Roland.

Her 10 bullets had all been used up, and there were still four sickle monsters left —10 of the beasts had been killed directly by the bullets, and two fell into the lake during the battle. Judging from the turbulent currents of the lake, Nightingale believed that the two beasts barely got a chance to survive and come back to the battle.

The violent attack from the demonic beasts left Nightingale no time to reload the bullets, and neither did she intend to. She tucked the pistol back to her belt and leaped over an invisible beast and reached its back when a swarm of demonic hybrid beasts came to her. She then pulled the invisible beast into the misty world.

The beast got shocked as his vision changed from the battlefield to the world of black and white.

Nightingale's magic power streamed from her fingertips. The following beasts that clashed with the first one were all pulled into the mist subsequently. As the number of the beasts entering the Mist increased, her magic power exceeded the consumption limit and began to drain. Just at that moment, one of the lines constituting the dome the misty world curled up and went flying

toward her.

This was the moment she had been waiting for. As more beasts had been pulled into the misty world, her magic power quickly drained and the misty world became unstabilized. The twisting lines had thus become a lethal weapon, although at other times they helped her leap a few meters away.

The white line swept over the beasts, and their figures suddenly froze.

It was like those beasts had vanished instantly, and in a split second, a "blank space" emerged in the sky of the misty world. But when the beasts reappeared, the weirdest thing happened. The lower parts of their bodies remained in the place where they had disappeared, while the upper parts several meters away as if a sharp longsword had cut all of them into halves with one swing and the body parts had been transported and floated in the air.

The bodies suspended for a few seconds before they hailed down into the lake, creating numerous water columns.

Chapter 813: "Monster"

Suddenly, Nightingale's view was no longer obscured.

Seeing this shocking event unfold, the demonic beasts slowed down and instead of crazily trying to surround her, they refused to move forward as if they were scared of her.

These demonic hybrids were scared.

The monster hanging on top of the cave waved its tentacles and roared furiously, but it didn't achieve the desired effect. The only ones who still followed its orders were three sickle monsters. They were now powerless and could no longer threaten Nightingale. The tight line of defense had now been broken.

No enemy could now stop her.

Nightingale gathered what was left of her magic power and rushed towards the dome center.

As she was closing in, she finally understood what Fran meant by abnormal.

The opponent was not so much a creature as it was a pile of exposed organs. It had neither epidermis nor muscular tissue while vascular intestines, tentacles, and organs that couldn't even be named were all stacked up, looking both unstable and horrible.

Obviously, throwing explosives into the monster's mouth was not possible. Nightingale turned her gaze to a pack of vibrating "meatballs". Although she was not certain whether it was a vital organ of the monster or not, it was at least placed much deeper and had flowing magic light inside. She guessed that the explosion of the explosives would inevitably cause more damage there.

It was a risky plan, but she only had one chance.

This fight required one fatal blow.

The more she was closing in, the more she could feel its size.

Those complex intestines were as thick as a house while the rest of the stacked up organs looked like a castle.

The only difference was that this castle was alive.

Seeing that the sickle monsters could not stop her, the monster started moving.

It shot several slender tentacles from within its body, trying to stop Nightingale. Some of the tentacles were like steel whips, which could easily break the rocks in the mountain, but were not very difficult to deal with. As long as she observed the silhouette of these tentacles in advance, she could use the empty spaces between them to avoid them. It was similar to penetrating a wall.

A few tentacles that contained magic power and could use different abilities were a different problem all together. Those colorful magical beams were particularly striking in the black and white world and Nightingale definitely did not want to experience what was like to get hit by them, so she used flash to avoid them. This, in turn, would greatly increase the consumption of her magic power.

Thankfully, the distance between the monster and her was not huge.

Only a few moments had passed before she stepped on the monster's huge body, who roared furiously, but in fear of hurting itself, stopped attacking recklessly with its tentacles. Nightingale instantly felt very relieved. She didn't hesitate to open her backpack, took out a pack of explosives, and rushed straight towards the meatballs.

She pulled off her next moves instantaneously. She pulled the fuse, stuffed the green smoked explosive and the backpack into the meatballs, and then returned to the misty world, hanging upside down. Then, she pushed with both of her feet and lunged towards the underground lake like an arrow.

The monster also noticed her movements but it did not seem to understand why the enemy would try so hard to get near just to leave a moment later without doing anything. As for the bag, in the monster's eyes, there was no threat at all. For a moment, it even forgot to move its tentacles to chase after the witch who was quickly falling.

The most dangerous place in the misty world was in midair. She would break into pieces if she hit some airflow silhouettes when she was falling and so she stopped exerting her ability and waved goodbye to the monster.

Curiously, at that moment, she thought of Roland.

Whenever they were testing gunpowder, he would always turn his back to the testing ground and say that real warriors never looked at an explosion. Even though both Agatha and her would roll their eyes at him, he didn't mind as if he had just completed a ritual that only he knew about.

Thinking about that, Nightingale couldn't help but smile.

But right now, she didn't want to imitate him.

It was not about being a real warrior or not.

She simply wanted to watch the monster explode into pieces.

Just as soon as the sound between the lake and the underground river meeting each other could be heard, a red light suddenly lit up the ceiling of the dark cave.

In a place where there was never daylight, a ray of light seemed as bright as the dawn. The darkness quickly faded, leaving behind the long shadows and for the first time, bright waves appeared on the lake's surface.

What followed was a thunderous roar—

Suddenly, the whole cave shook!

Nightingale clearly saw, among the dazzling fireworks, the body

of the monster convulsing fiercely, as if it was suffering greatly. Half of the "Bloody Moon" covering the dome suddenly disappeared and some of the organs were shot out like volcanic eruptions. As for the area close to the explosion, it was instantly set on fire, generating a thick, dark smoke.

Splash!

She crashed into the water.

The world momentarily became quiet, leaving only the sound of her beating heart.

The fast spinning of the water formed a bottomless black hole under her body and it seemed like it wanted to drag her into the abyss. In the face of such force, any struggle would be meaningless.

But, thankfully, Nightingale was prepared.

She released what little of her magic power that was left to summon the Mist and used the spiraling white lines to climb to the surface as if climbing the stairs.

At this point, the magic power in her body had been completely depleted and the after effects of overuse began to appear. Her brain was attacked by intense pain and dizziness, her limbs could not stop trembling, and she could hardly control her body anymore.

As she struggled to get to the lakeshore, Nightingale knew she was running out of strength. Before losing consciousness, she saw a worm breaking through the wall and a golden figure flying towards her in a hurry.

...

"Nightingale... Is she ok?" Fran asked anxiously.

"It's nothing serious, she just exhausted her magic power," Agatha briefly examined Nightingale and then handed her to the God's Punishment Witch, "You carry her. We must leave this place at once."

When Nightingale left, everyone decided that no matter what, they would go to meet her after the explosion and decided to let Fran eat all their remaining food. Even though it was not certain she could find a way out, she could still crawl with them to the camp site.

But they did not expect the explosion to be so effective. It not only stopped the worm carrier inside the walls, but it also made the rest of the demonic beasts flee the area.

"Leave her to me," Elena personally took Nightingale. After witnessing the battle, the Taquila survivors became more respectful toward the blond witch.

"Don't we need to finish it off?" Lightning looked at the struggling monster, as if not satisfied, "It doesn't seem to be dead."

"Dying beasts are the most dangerous and you can only bring one pack of explosives at most, so it's better not take this risk," Agatha said with a deep voice, "by the time the First Army has been assembled, it'll be dead sooner or later.

"Uhm... fine," the little girl hesitated before nodding.

Just when everyone was ready to leave, the monster suddenly issued a cry. Following the dull and muddy sound, the lake suddenly changed.

Under the sparkling flames, a huge skeleton came out of the water and opened a row of rib claws towards the top of the cave. Even in such a fast current of water, it remained steady.

The monster loosened its tentacles that were clining to the top of the cave and fell into the skeleton. The sinking skeleton suddenly stirred up layers of waves, making the lake water push toward the shore. Even the surging underground river flowed backwards for a time. The ribs began to close, as if wrapping up the monster into a package and then slowly sunk back into the lake. The instant it came into contact with the water, the burning flames on the

monster turned into white smoke and emitted a pungent odor.

Right before the monster vanished, everyone saw its densely packed eyes. Although half of them were gone, the rest of the eyes expressed a strong sense of hatred toward them.

Moments later, the swirling lake engulfed the monster as if it had never appeared.

Chapter 814: Impartial person

"The demonic beasts have fled! They all fled!"

Cheers were heard across the battlefield. The demonic beasts that were previously gathered at the entrance of the cave had all fled away leaving several corpses behind them. The machine gunner released the trigger only to find out that his finger joint had gone numb. Because there was no time to change the gun barrel, it had turned red which, according to the shooting regulations, meant that it was scrapped.

"Their numbers were intimidating, but once we start fighting them, they didn't look so scary."

"The Church's God's Punishment Army was much more fierce."

"They are only beasts after all."

"Beasts? Why are you talking nonsense? Go fight them with a bow if you dare. Three years ago, these things were terrorizing the Western Region. Everything changed because of His Majesty, do you understand!"

"Ye-Yes, Captain!"

"Instead of celebrating, change the gun barrel."

Edith was standing in the back of the battlefield. She had a thoughtful look while watching the busy yet orderly First Army. After following Roland's army to participate in the Tooth Extraction Campaign and the Church's destruction, she always tried to imagine how would she command the army in order to achieve the maximum effectiveness of the firearms.

Without a doubt, this was a completely new kind of army and so the combat strategy was different from that of the knightages and the mercenaries from before. It was not easy to forget her previous successful experience of fighting through charging, relying on excellent weapons, and personal bravery. But when she realized

that knights could no longer compete against the new army, she promptly discarded all of her previous experience and started watching all of His Majesty's actions closely. Through today's battle, she was able to verify that her thinking was basically correct.

The most notable feature of the firearms was their ability to kill opponents with extreme efficiency before they could get closer without regard to the spacing between soldiers and their physical condition. Therefore, the narrower the shooting area, the more intense the firepower would be. As long as the ammunition supply did not stop, they could fire from morning to night.

Two platoons of soldiers could be arranged in a battlefield where previously only three to four knights would be able to charge from. They could only arrange three machine guns not because more could not fit but due to limited ammunition. But even so, their fierce firepower still made it hard for the demonic hybrids to advance—they did not even get tired or need to aim. They just had to pull the trigger. Whenever the opponents were too close together, she would even see a thick blood red mist arising in the entrance.

If His Majesty was in command, he wouldn't have done anything different.

The only thing she did not understand was the behavior of the demonic beasts.

Obviously, some of them had basic intelligence. When it got difficult to attack the cave entrance, many of the demonic hybrids began to wander outside the cave, occasionally howling, but still not advancing as if they were encouraging the other demonic beasts to sacrifice themselves. But since they had the ability to think, why did they still obey the weird commanding voices? The demonic beasts apparently did not need a relationship between lords and subjects, which was about mutual support and protection. As long as they escaped into the Barbarian Land, they

could totally survive alone, unlike humans who had to be part of a group in order to survive.

Could it be that there was an inexplicable connection between the demonic beasts and the owner of that voice whose importance was above the beasts' own survival?

It was hard for her to imagine that.

She thought she should ask His Majesty Roland after the search was completed.

Currently, the only thing in Neverwinter that she found surprising and hard to figure out was His Majesty's thoughts. Whenever they were talking, she would always ponder over the same question: how vast could the human mind be?

"Miss Edith, you were very helpful this battle..." Brian's voice interrupted her thoughts. She turned around and saw the young officer's face full of gratitude. "I'll definitely mention your contribution to His Majesty in the battle report!"

"I only did my job," Edith smiled, "I wasn't sure it would be successful at that time so you don't need to mention my suggestion in the report."

"Unacceptable!" Brian shook his head again and again. "His Majesty said that in the army, the result and not the process is the only thing that matters. A victory is a victory. If I don't mention your contribution, then I'm no different than a thief. Plus, it's also unfair to you!"

"Fine..." The Pearl of the Northern Region shrugged. "If you insist."

"Of course." At this point, he paused and then made a military salute. "Furthermore, I now understand more what you said before about trust. The First Army thanks you for your advice. I'll leave now as I also have many things to attend to."

Looking at the captain leaving, Edith suddenly understood why

His Majesty chose a patrol captain of the border to serve as an important military officer. Battle achievements were the basis for the knights when requesting a reward from the lord and the last thing they would want was to share with others. There were countless cases that involved faking and lying, and not even her trustees could resolve them.

In general, though the First army was different in many aspects, promotions and rewards were still linked to battle achievements. She was not a member of the army so even if the other party had completely concealed this matter, she wouldn't have personally argued her case to His Majesty. To be able to calmly share with others whatever benefits he had gained just to be fair, in fact, compared to other knights, this former patrol captain was actually much more of a knight.

Loyal to his king and honest, this was probably why Roland entrusted him with such an important task. Commanding and knowledge could both be learned, but a person's character was hard to change. Edith had noticed very early on that the spirit and manner of His Majesty's First Army were completely different from those of the knights. It was something new completely. Probably the key to creating such an army was abandoning the noble's power and selecting only civilians to enlist, coupled with the ideological education in the primary textbooks.

And now, she had also left her name in the army.

...

Half a day later, Roland received intelligence that the situation had been resolved. At this point, the one hundred emergency reinforcements had already embarked on the boat while the rest of the reinforcements were also preparing their belongings, waiting for the dispatching order. Even the newcomers of the Witch Union —Annie, Broken Sword and the rest were prepared to go support them. From the City Hall to the First Army, the whole of Neverwinter was nervous as if the city had been attacked by

demonic beasts, but in the end, it all proved to be just a false alarm.

The messenger was, once again, Maggie. Looking at her tilted head and slightly opened mouth, Roland did not know whether to laugh or cry. He took out some beef from the drawer and threw it on the table. She immediately picked it up happily.

However, taking morale into account, he eventually did not order the first platoon to return but instead replaced Annie's team with Soraya and Summer in order to conduct a more comprehensive exploration of the ruins.

Chapter 815: Discoveries and Decisions

In the next three days, the reports and messages about the exploration in the Great Snow Mountain had been sent back to Neverwinter one after another.

Roland had felt his heart skipping a beat the moment he had heard that Nightingale had exhausted her magic power and passed out during a fight. Fortunately, she had been alright when this news had arrived. In order to reassure His Majesty, she had also asked Maggie to let Roland know that she was alright.

The exploration results showed that inside the Great Snow Mountain there was indeed a city in ruins, which was left by the underground civilization. However, as compared to the maze inside the Impassable Mountain Range, this city was not that well preserved. Most caves in the newly discovered ruins had collapsed long before, and several intact compartments were just filled with spoiled food, bug eggs and corpses. Near the underground lake, a broken magic core was found by the Taquila witches. According to the scouting team's reports, they found no documented records there, and the best part of their journey was the discovery of an original carrier and two devouring worms inside the mountain.

He was surprised by the results.

If this monster with many eyes was just a dumb beast who happened to settle down in the ruins, he would never find its destructive behaviors strange. However, it was obviously not just a stupid animal. He still remembered that something in this Great Snow Mountain had sent devouring worms to swallow Agatha's laboratory and the Blackstone Pagoda in the Devil's Town. These actions were clearly not just for food. In this exploration inside the mountain, the team had also spotted both human beings and demons trapped in the strange bug eggs. These facts made him believe that the unknown enemy must have been trying to collect information about the other two species it was going to fight

against in the Battle of Divine Will.

When he received the first batch of "bug egg corpses", he noticed that their decomposed skin was apparently not caused by corrosion but corpse wax formed by long-term storage. That meant these corpses had been kept in the egg for a very long time and were apparently not stored as food.

Only an intelligent individual would make other creatures into specimens. In that case, he really did not understand why the monster had destroyed this underground city.

He wondered whether it was because that the monster did not care about the things treasured by Taquila witches.

He scanned through Soraya's pictures of the scenes inside the mountain and became lost in thought.

He found that the moment before the monster sank into the water, its remaining hundreds of eyes seemed to be filled with resentment. He did not know whether this was a false impression or not. He felt its eyes became different when it was severely wounded. In the beginning, those eyes appearing on the cave roof were simply gazing at the witches, but after they hurt it badly, its eyes showed an obvious emotional expression. When he put those two pictures together to compare, he felt as if the monsters in those two pictures were not the same one.

As for the underground lake in the bottom of the ruins, where the monster sank in, Sylvie confirmed that it was connected to a water vein leading to the Swirling Sea.

On his current technical level, he was not able to track the enemy once it entered the Swirling Sea, and let this monster successfully get away. What he could do next was to block the water vein by collapsing the dome of the ruins with powerful explosives. By doing so, he could ensure the safety of Neverwinter.

The exploration team had also sent him good news.

In Lightning's reports, he read about some bugs. They looked the same as the "egg bugs", but had once gushed out very sticky jelly to tightly trap Fran. The mucus they spat out was able to become a consolidated, sticky thing like spider silk in certain circumstances. These bugs were neither intelligent nor aggressive. According to Agatha's studies, they were not from the Fertile Plains.

In other words, these bugs were probably brought here by the "monster".

However, what intrigued Roland most was not the origin of these bugs but the fact that their mucus could solidify quickly. According to Lightning's description, these bugs could be bred in captivity.

Therefore, in his reply, he asked Agatha to make a detailed report on the living and eating habits of these bugs and to investigate what kind of harm they might cause. He also required the team to collect the strange plants and fungi in the ruins. He was particularly interested in the fruits which gave out dim, cold light in the dark and the giant mushroom as big as an adult.

When he was about to review the wonderful pictures of the underground caves, someone knocked on his door.

Phyllis walked into his office.

She bowed and said, "Your Majesty, Lady Pasha would like to talk to you about the ruins."

He immediately nodded to agree. He had sent all the exploration reports of these days to the Taquila survivors and he also really wanted to hear the ancient witches' views of the monster.

"Good, let's hold a video meeting."

"Vi... what?" Phyllis was stunned and took a few seconds to realize what it was. "You mean a meeting through the phantom instrument?"

"Yes, in the usual place at the reception hall on the first floor." He could not help but grin as he was so happy to finally find someone

who could understand his "nonsense".

"I got it." She laughed and said, "I'm going to inform Pasha."

...

When he walked to the reception hall, Faldi and all the other God's Punishment Witches all rose and bowed to him with both hands on the chest as if they were saluting a higher ascendant. They looked solemn, and were completely different from the they looked in the Dream World.

Since he had taken them into his Dreamland, he was now venerated as someone similar to the Three Chiefs of the Union. He could tell from their etiquette and attitude toward him that now they did not consider him as a common man anymore, though they still used the phrase "common people" to describe his subjects.

Though they had agreed not to care too much about etiquette as he had required, they still saluted him more formally than his own guards. Seeing this, he had no choice but to let them do whatever they wanted.

Inside the hall, he saw Pasha through the light curtain waiting for him.

"First of all, I have to express my sincere gratitude to you." She said while bending her main tentacle. "Your help is of great importance to Taquila in exploring the ruins and in restoring the God's Punishment Witches' lost feelings."

"I'm helping myself by helping you since we'll be fighting together in the upcoming Battle of Divine Will," he replied with a smile. "Well, what're you going to do with the newly discovered shells in the ruins?"

"There're only two ways to deal with them... Moving them here or moving the soul instrument to where they're located." She paused to think for a minute and continued. "I prefer the second method."

When the magic core was turned off, it would look like some dry skeleton. He could use a concrete boat to carry it, but he was afraid that he could not transport shells, even empty ones, in this way. The big blob and worms were too scary for the common people. He was clear that the universal education of Neverwinter had not yet prepared them to accept these dreadful shells that looked like monsters from hell.

Roland agreed with Pasha's suggestion of the second method, though the transportation of the instruments still posed a problem.

"So have you picked out the witches who're willing to accept the Soul Transfer?"

Half a month ago, Taquila survivors had been eager to search for ruins left by the underground civilization in the Great Snow Mountain, since they had earnestly hoped to find new shells in the ruins. Most of the God's Punishment Witches at that time had longed to merge with them to regain their long-lost feelings, such as touch, taste and smell, even though they had known that by doing so, they would look like monsters and would never change back into human forms.

However, now the situation was different, as they had another choice.

Chapter 816: [Deep Sea Demons]

Now everyone in the Third Border City knew that a God's Punishment Witch could regain her appearance and feelings when she entered the Dream World by cutting off her consciousness. Roland had repeatedly heard Phyllis describe their enthusiasm for the Dream World. According to her, every time she got back to the underground, they would follow her and keep asking about her experiences in that world.

He wondered whether they would still be eager to merge with shells when they found out this new method to restore their feelings.

However, it was not a perfect solution to their problem, as they could only regain their appearance and feelings in their sleep. By contrast, being in shells, they could always have some feelings, and these shells were almost immortal unless they were heavily damaged.

It would be difficult to make a choice between these two alternatives.

He thought of another possibility for them. If they had kept the news about the Dream World a secret, they would have been able to send the instrument and God's Punishment Witches there to carry out their Soul Transfer. This way, the volunteers would never be able to go back even if they regretted afterwards. However, he believed that Pasha would not delude her witches into accepting the shells. Based on his observation in the past month, though the Taquila witches had lived in seclusion for hundreds of years, they did not turn into a conservative organization. They were still open to new things and had abolished class inequality in their group. Apparently, the sacrifice of the Three Chiefs had deeply moved them, and the threat posed by demons had kept them working to make greater progress.

Pasha seemed to read his mind. "You don't have to worry about this problem. With more shells, we'll be better equipped to defeat the demons. Original carriers can operate the magic core, and devouring worms can speed up the construction of the defense line. They'll do everything to win the upcoming Battle of Divine Will without hesitation. In fact, the volunteers have decided to go to the Great Snow Mountain together with the instrument."

"Volunteers aren't afraid of any sacrifice..." Roland thought while biting his lips. "It seems that I've worried too much. I'll send ships to transport the instrument for you when the exploration has finished."

"Thank you for helping us," she said happily.

He nodded and laid Soraya's pictures on the table. "All the information I've sent you before were written materials. I finally received these pictures of the ruins today. I would like to know your thoughts on this monster."

"Please wait for a moment." She waved her tentacles to summon Celine and Alethea, who had been repairing the Instrument of Divine Retribution. Three blobs came to the light curtain to study the pictures together."

With their tentacles connected, they remained silent for an unexpectedly long time, and communicated through their minds. As they were not able to show any expression on the outside, he felt as if this video call had already disconnected.

After a long time, he finally heard Pasha in his head again. "Sorry to have kept you waiting. We're shocked by some pictures, so we have to discuss them thoroughly."

"It's neither a demonic beast nor a demon, right?"

"Yes," said Celine, "and the skeleton that fell into the water has appeared in Lady Natalia's description about the Divine Land."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. We've stayed underground for hundreds of years, but we would never be so foolish as to forget such an important piece of information. In fact, carriers have a much better memory than human beings," said Alethea, grumpily. "Lady Natalia saw the sea and skeletons in the third painting scroll. This thing in the pictures matches her description. More importantly, this lake is connected to the sea. We can be sure it's the thing mentioned by Lady Natalia."

"So, now we can say it's from the unknown civilization?" He asked while touching his chin. He was not surprised at their conclusion. When he had found the devouring worm also swallowing things in the Devil's Town, he had suspected that it must have been sent by some neutral party who had decided not to help anyone in the Battle of Divine Will. Alternatively, it could also have been the unknown enemy in the upcoming battle. He had made up this exploration plan not only to help the Taquila survivors but also to eliminate hidden threats for Neverwinter and spy on the unknown enemy.

He had read a similar description in Zero's memory fragment, but it was vague. Now, as the Taquila witches also thought the monster belonged to the unknown enemy, he could confirm that suspicion.

"It's highly possible, but..." Pasha hesitated for a while and continued. "There're still many things we don't understand, such as the demonic beasts."

"These beasts across the Land of Dawn are mutated animals. They should have been affected by the Erosion of magic power, just like witches. But why did they follow this monster's orders? It's different from the demons who enslave the demonic hybrids. The beasts seemed to willingly obey this monster's orders."

Roland had also pondered over this question. He thought that if the unknown enemy were intelligent creatures who had demonic beasts as part of their civilization, they would have accumulated

these hybrids first and then used them to eliminate both human beings and demons. He could not understand why the unknown civilization wasted these beasts in the Months of Demons every year.

Maybe the origin of those mutated beasts might not be as simple as they had believed.

"We'll know the answer when the Battle of Divine Will starts." He shrugged his shoulders, pretending to be relaxed. "They'd better be the monster's relatives. In that case, we'll never see these ugly beasts on the snowy plains after we have defeated all our enemies in the battle."

Pasha was stunned and then started to chuckle. "Yes, you're right indeed. No matter where they come from, we'll still have to defeat them in the Battle of Divine Will."

After that, they discussed the defense line construction project and the method to block the underground river in the newly discovered ruins. When the meeting was about to finish, Roland suddenly raised a question.

"Ah, yeah, as we've caught some clues left by the hidden civilization now, we have to give it a name, don't we?" He cleared his throat. "Just like what we did with the first painting scroll. We call the guys in it demons."

"Is this important?" Pasha tilted her main tentacle. "Demons is just their most widely known name. They were also called Blood Beasts, the Deformity or Polluters back in the Union."

"Of course, a proper name is very important for propaganda and motivational campaigns. We should make it sound as evil as possible so as to arouse the people's indignation."

"So... do you have any idea?"

"Well, since these hidden enemies stay in the sea for most of the time, shall we call them 'Sea Monsters'?"

"..."

All the people in the meeting fell silent.

"Uhm... isn't that good?"

"I thought the name 'the Third Border City' was bad enough. I never expected you to make up something even worse," Alethea mocked, "'Sea Monster'? It sounds like a giant octopus."

"Alethea!" Pasha moved her main tentacle to give Alethea a knock on the head. "Your Majesty, if you think it's alright... I think... we don't have a problem with it."

The ancient witch agreed on the name, but reluctantly. Roland picked up his cup to sip some tea whilst trying to conceal his embarrassment.

"Ahem." Scroll who was by his side and taking notes for this meeting coughed suddenly. "Your Majesty, how about calling them Deep Sea Demons?"

"Deep Sea... Demons?" He repeated.

"Yes, since the concept of demons has been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, they'll understand what this new name refers to without us clarifying. This way, we don't need much efforts to describe the unknown civilization for the people. It's better for the City Hall to carry out the propaganda campaigns, and the people won't feel that we've got to fight many enemies at the same time," explained Scroll, with a quill in his hand.

Though he was unwilling to accept the fact that someone else came up with a better name, he still twitched his mouth and said, "It seems to be a little better... Let's use this name."

Now the civilization depicted in the second painting scroll got a formal name.

Chapter 817: Meeting Ashes Again

Lorgar slowed down when she saw the first forest in her journey.

For the first time ever, she set foot in the domain of a northern kingdom. She had heard many people describing the evergreen woodlands, flourishing grasslands and steadily flowing water in this place. According to them, one would feel how soft and moist the soil was by simply inserting a hand in it, and would never have to worry about being bitten by some hidden sandworm when fetching water. The north was said to be a place full of life and vitality, like the Southernmost Region in the past.

However, she did not feel the same way about this place.

She thought perhaps it was still the Months of Demons, so this domain did not look any greener the Iron Sand City's big oasis. The trees here had nothing but stark branches, and the ground was covered by withered weeds. Only the dark brown soil under her feet reminded her that this place was not a desert.

She looked around and quickly found a place of shelter from the wind. In this shelter, she transformed back into a girl and put on her clothes. After that, she continued to track the caravans by following their smell that was left in the air.

That was how she traveled these days. When night fell, she would transform into a wolf and run toward the north. She lived on sandworms and Giant Scorpions and had even attracted some Desert Wolves along the way. In the daytime, she would walk on the Silver Stream trade route in her human form. This way, she could get her water bag refilled when she ran into some merchants there.

Her journey was not smooth sailing all the time.

Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan was always generous, thus she would attract some people who were coveting her bag of gold

royals. But she had vigilant ears that were erected on her head, so she was always able to know the merchants' ulterior motives in advance. At the very beginning of her journey, she had made all the vicious guys pay a bitter price, but now she decided just to follow those caravans from a distance and used the smell they left to confirm their direction.

Half a day later, she heard the sound of sea waves.

As this new harbor town built by the northern kingdom did not have thick city walls, she could see everything clearly by standing on a high slope. Tents stood along the river. Many people gathered near the sea and seemed to be busy with constructing some square, flat buildings. What she found most surprising about this bustling scene was that most of the workers were northerners. She could only see a small number of Mojins there.

Shortly after stepping onto the territory of Port of Clearwater, she found the First Army's camp.

She identified herself to the guards and soon met the black-haired woman again.

This woman she had been eagerly looking forward to seeing was Ashes.

Before she could think about what to say, Ashes opened her mouth and said calmly, "I knew you'd come." Her golden eyes gave the Wolf Girl a feeling of familiarity, making her feel as if they had just said goodbye to each other yesterday.

Lorgar could not help but shake her ears. "How did you know?"

"Because you're just like the old me." Ashes curled her lips into a smile. "In your heart, there's a goal you want to pursue."

Her eyes lit up immediately. "You were pursuing combats, too?"

"No... I just wanted revenge." The Extraordinary shook her head and turned away. "Come with me. Echo will be very happy to see you again."

"Revenge?" Lorgar was stunned and thought to herself. After a while, she finally realized that Ashes had just meant that they both had goals but not the same one. The Wolf Girl caught up with the Extraordinary and asked, "Who did you want to get back at?"

"Church of Hermes." Ashes shrugged. "At first, I did this just to vent my hatred. As time went by, it became a habit until I met Her Highness Tilly. She made me see that there were more important things in this world than killing all the church people."

When Ashes mentioned Her Highness Tilly, the Wolf Girl perceived a feeling of tenderness in her tone, which was rare for the Extraordinary. She guessed this Tilly who was able to change such a determined and strong-willed person must have been very uncommon.

She secretly bore this name in her mind.

When they passed a flat building under construction, Lorgar raised another question. "I heard that the Port of Clearwater has become burned ruins ever since the Queen of Clearwater left this area. These people aren't local refugees, are they? Why do they seem to outnumber the Mojins immigrants?"

"Of course, they aren't. They all come from Neverwinter."

The Wolf Girl could hardly believe what she had heard. "Neverwinter... you mean the domain of King of Graycastle, Roland Wimbledon? He ordered his own people to build residences for the Mojins here?"

"He didn't need to force anyone. All of these people came here voluntarily because the construction project here pays them better. They can get a pay raise of five to ten silver royals by working here. The workers said that soon after the Ministry of Construction issued a recruitment notice for this project, City Hall was packed with applicants."

The Ministry of Construction? City Hall? The Wolf Girl felt lost

hearing these strange words. She wagged her tail and asked, "What about... the Sand Nation?"

Lorgar remembered the first batch of immigrants consisted of several small clans and were about 2,000 to 3,000 people. She wondered why the great chief still wanted to send his own people traveling all the way from the north to the Southernmost Region when he had so many Mojins to work for him. She started to doubt his true motives.

"As His Majesty wants to build a new city in Endless Cape, most Mojins went there," Ashes answered quickly, "so did the people from Osha clan. Only by participating in the construction task, could the Mojins get new homes and food supply just like the subjects of Neverwinter."

Lorgar was surprised to hear that the king planned to build a city in the uninhabited wasteland which had no oasis. If it was not for Ashes, a proud person who was loath to lie, she would never believe this.

"What's the King of Graycastle thinking about?" she wondered.

"Then... what about the people who are unable to go there?"

"If they've got to stay due to health problems, they can help the construction team here to build the Port of Clearwater. By doing so, they'll get the same treatment. In other words, as long as you're willing to work, you'll never have to worry about going hungry." Ashes sighed with mixed feelings. "Her Highness Tilly once said that the ideal world in her mind was a place where you reaped what you sowed and made a fortune by your own hard work instead of exploiting the others. It sounded incredible, but her useless brother did make it happen."

Lorgar automatically ignored the last comment made by Ashes. "But... why does the great chief want to build a city in Endless Cape? That place has nothing..."

"There's Blackwater. His Majesty wants to collect as much of it as possible," Ashes said while spreading out her palms.

"That's the reason?" The Wolf Girl was stunned, rooted to the ground. "He did so much work just to collect Blackwater? He can simply buy it from the Iron Sand City, just like the Queen of Clearwater used to do!"

Lorgar did not believe in goodwill for no apparent reason. Most dominators just wanted wealth and lands, but the king apparently was acting contrary to this principle. He gave the land to the Sand Nation and spent a lot to reclaim the desert and to station troops in this place. She believed that the money he spent on these things was enough to buy hundreds of barrels of Blackwater.

"If what Ashes said was true, then the king's deeds were really strange," she thought and then started to worry about her father's decision.

She expected Ashes to refute or explain further, but the Extraordinary just raised her brow and said, "Yes, that's true... Who knows what the hell he's thinking?"

"What?"

Ashes said casually, "Even in Neverwinter, there're only a few who can understand his absurd theories. Andrea may be able to know what he's thinking. After all, they're both nobles, and their friendship is one mind in two bodies. The others probably won't be able to explain this to you. Anyway, who cares. I'm not here for him. As long as Lady Tilly thinks it's a good idea, I'll be fine with it." She stopped walking after saying these words, and then said, "Here we are."

Chapter 818: The Neverwinter Power Rankings

Just like Ashes had said, Drow Silvermoon was overjoyed at Lorgar's arrival. The Osha princess immediately gave her a warm hug. The Wolf Girl was surprised and did not know where to put her raised hand. Usually a chief of a clan only greeted another chief with a hug. Lorgar had intended to greet the new chief of Osha clan by bowing to her with a hand on the chest, though Silvermoon was one or two years younger than her.

During their conversation, the chief did not put on an air of superiority. When she heard that Lorgar was planning to go to Neverwinter with them, she immediately regarded her as a sister. She asked the Wolf Girl to call her Echo and happily introduced her to the new life of the witches in Neverwinter.

Lorgar did not believe everything that Echo had said. According to what she knew, no matter how abundant Graycastle's resources was, it could never eliminate hunger. She guessed the chief might be exaggerating by describing the place as a Kingdom of God, where no one worried about hunger and illness which could be cured by witches.

Though this was the first time she left the desert, she had heard many tales about the northern kingdoms. She knew the kingdoms were just like the Iron Sand City where only a small group of people in high places could lead a luxurious life. She believed that as a Divine Lady who was no longer an heiress to the Wildflame clan, she would never be as lucky as the Osha princess who had gained the king's appreciation.

But this was not a problem for Lorgar.

She just wanted to improve herself by fighting all those strong opponents in Neverwinter.

When she told them that her clan also considered moving to Port of Clearwater, they did not appear pleasantly surprised as she had expected. Iron Axe, Osha's faithful dog, even knitted his eyebrows. Only Echo smiled and asked, "Really?" The Osha princess seemed excited and continued to say, "Great! As soon as the Wildflame clan comes here, it won't be long before Port of Clearwater restores its prosperity of the past. His Majesty's goal can be achieved earlier!"

"Ahem... Lady Echo." Iron Axe eyed Echo. "It's just their plan, and it won't necessarily come true."

"Ah, yes, I was too impatient." Echo smiled, slightly embarrassed.

Lorgar immediately understood the reason for their cold response. As the former strongest clan, Wildflame had more than 5,000 people in total, significantly outnumbering all the Mojin immigrants here. More importantly, she believed that the northerners must have found that these small clans who were competing with each other were much easier to control as compared to some powerful big clan. She thought that they probably never expected that a clan in the Iron Sand City would decide that quickly to move here since the six big clans in the city did not have to worry that their oasis would dry up. These bigs clans were considered to be the most reluctant ones to leave the city, and most people even believed that they would never turn to the King of Graycastle.

She did not continue talking about this matter for she knew that the Wildflame clan moving here would increase the northerners' influence and at the same time change the balance of powers in this area. She had to admit that it was not a bad thing if the Osha clan or the king failed to control the situation at that time and let her father grasp the power.

After all, she was still Prince Lorgar of the Wildflame clan.

...

In the next few days, Lorgar would walk along Clearwater Bay

whenever she got a chance. As she had met Ashes here, she was not that eager to leave for Neverwinter. She decided to use this period of time to examine carefully this evergreen land where Wildflame decided to settle down.

She soon discovered that the construction speed of Graycastle's workers was way beyond her imagination. On the bank of the river, they built a row of hemispherical furnaces which could produce a new batch of bricks each day with a mixture of earth and river sand. And these furnaces did not burn wood but some gray-black stones shipped from the northwest. They only needed to be filled with these stones once in a day, since these stones could keep burning all day long, which seemed much better than charcoals.

Brick production was the part where more Mojins, mostly women and seniors, were involved. They were divided into several groups, digging earth or carrying black stones. For each basket a worker dug out or carried, the supervisor would press a mark on his or her arm. According to the Wolf Girl's observation, the marks determined how much food a worker could get each day.

As for the construction work, she seldom saw Mojins engage in it. The northerners did everything. They mixed the water with some gray powder to make paste and used it when they stacked bricks. Each house was built with the same size, style and method. She could notice new changes in these buildings almost every day.

Another thing that greatly surprised her was how differently the Mojins and the people from Graycastle reacted when they saw her half-animal looks.

Since leaving the Iron Sand City, she no longer covered her fluffy tail and ears. Most Mojins would avoid her eyes when they saw her and try to back away from her, even though they had the same skin color. She was no stranger to this kind of reactions and was prepared for this.

Whereas the people from Graycastle did not show even the

slightest bit of fear or hatred in front of her. Some braver ones even took the initiative to say hello to her and seemed to be used to this kind of looks.

She was baffled by their behavior and asked Ashes about this.

"Ah... you mean this. Isn't it a usual thing for the witches?" The Extraordinary said while spreading out her palms. "Half human and half beast isn't a rare thing. Someone can even totally transform into a beast." She continued to explain, "For example, there's a witch named Maggie. She looks much more scary than you after transformation. However, after she acted as a rescuer several times, everyone got used to her looks. Even if you don't look human, they won't ostracize you."

Lorgar wiggled her wolf ears and thought, "Uhm... Is that true? In that case, my determination to embrace my defects and accept my true self was not necessary at all?"

She suddenly thought of another question. "Ah, are you the strongest witch in Neverwinter?"

"Well..." The Wolf Girl did not know whether it was an illusion, but she did feel that Ashes looked more serious now. "That depends on the types of my opponents. One type of witches can wear God's Stone of Retaliation. The other type of witches usually don't wear them."

"They're not able to use their abilities wearing God's Stones, are they?"

"Yes. Without God's Stone, I'm not sure I can defeat some witches in the Witch Union."

"Even you can't defeat them?" Lorgar was shocked.

Ashes nodded. "I believe I could before they evolved, but their improved abilities were beyond common sense. They're not something you can fight with using just speed and strength. For example, there's a witch called Leaf. When you fight with her

within the area controlled by her Heart of Forest, she'll become as powerful as the deities. It'll be extremely hard to escape from her trap in the woods, even if you wear God's Stone of Retaliation. If I have to fight against the witches of Neverwinter, she's definitely the last one I want to meet."

The Wolf Girl was thrilled when she heard this. "Who else?"

"Anna. Although she's not good at combat, her ability is impeccable. Without God's Stone, I can't imagine how to defeat her. I mean in a duel. But since she's the most important witch in Neverwinter and Roland's sweetheart, you'll never get a chance to fight her." Ashes continued while counting on her fingers. "And Nightingale. If you often challenge the Neverwinter witches, you'll definitely attract her attention. As she's touchy and has a really weird ability, you'd better avoid fighting her."

Lorgar wagged her tail, imprinting the names on her memory one by one. "So... what about Maggie? You said she could transform into a big beast?"

"Yes, she'll make a well-matched rival for you in a duel, but I'd advise you not to do so." Ashes seemed to think of something and smiled meaningfully. "That's because all the people who challenged her could not get rid of bad luck, and if you accidentally hurt her, you'd incur the wrath of the entire Witch Union."

Chapter 819: A Graceful Lady

Lorgar nodded to Ashes as she considered Maggie as one of the top dogs in the Witch Union. In her mind, the witch was still an ugly, cruel, but very formidable beast.

"So... what about the witches wearing God's Stones of Retaliation?"

The Wolf Girl knew that once her opponent used God's Stones, her ability would be significantly limited. Under such circumstances, she would not be able to freely transform all her body parts. If this opponent were just another warrior from the desert, it would be fine. However, if they were an Extraordinary like Ashes, it would be impossible for her to come out on top. Her ability was useless when she was faced with such a strong witch who also wore God's Stone. Given this, she had ranked Ashes as the best fighter amongst the witches from Neverwinter.

The Extraordinary remained silent for a while before replying. "Suppose there's someone whose strength and speed is in no way inferior to those of an Extraordinary. At the same time, she's an almost unlimited lifespan and will never be harmed by any injuries. Even if she suffers fatal blows, she'll be able to completely recover, given time. How strong do you think she would be?"

Lorgar could not help but gasp in astonishment.

Being an experienced warrior herself, she was well aware of the importance of fighting skills and experience.

In the holy duels, the toughest opponent to deal with wouldn't be those brave young fighters, but instead, the seasoned warriors who were in their 30s. These veterans were usually the backbone of a clan, and they often served as combat tutors and supervisors for a clan's newer generation. She would never underestimate such warriors who not only matched the younger fighters in strength but were also much more experienced, having gone through

numerous life or death situations. However, when warriors turned 40, their body would inevitably become less agile, and the wounds suffered over the years would gradually accumulate and worsen. Even if their skills became more and more refined over time, they would no longer be able to move as fluidly as they once had done.

Lorgar wanted to go to Neverwinter to hone her fighting skills was because she knew that there was an overpowered healing witch who could heal all sorts of injuries. Now she was more intrigued by her future trip to the Western Region as there was even a witch who was impervious to pain and had an unlimited lifespan.

She believed that anyone who lived long enough would be able to become a very accomplished fighter. Even just thinking about going against such a warrior made her scared... No, excited.

"Is there really such a person in Neverwinter?" Lorgar asked excitedly.

"Yes, there's this witch in the city who's called Phyllis," Ash replied, "I've never fought her, but..."

"But what?"

The Extraordinary said slowly, "One time when I was practicing with my sword in the castle's garden, she happened to pass by and give me a few suggestions. Later, I tried practicing again while following her pointers and found that my sword strokes did get noticeably smoother. Unfortunately, I left Neverwinter soon after and haven't gotten a chance to ask her for more pointers."

"Did she really only watch you practice for a short while?" Lorgar's tail wagged even faster. Most tutors, even the very experienced ones, had to exchange a few moves with their students to spot the errors in their movements. That was the reason the big clans built their Halls of Military Affairs for their fighters to train in. The more a student matched a tutor in his or her skills, the more difficult it was for the tutor to find faults within the student's

techniques. Ashes was undoubtedly an excellent fighter, so the Wolf Girl believed that the immortal witch, Phyllis, was indeed a mighty warrior for quickly finding Ashes' shortcomings just by watching her practice.

Lorgar thought that now it seemed like Phyllis was the best fighter in Neverwinter. Since when it came to a real battle, no one could rely solely on the off chance that the opponent was not wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation.

She ranked Ashes as the second because she was also immune to the effects of God's Stones. This powerful Extraordinary was the ideal role model that she was chasing after. As for the witch who was blessed with infinite life, the Wolf Girl believed that it was some miracle created by the Three Gods and that it was not something that she could ask for.

Lorgar couldn't wait to find out how she would fare against these powerful fighters.

She was now, even more, looking forward to her journey to the west.

Ashes seemed to see through the Wolf Girl's mind and smiled meaningfully again. Instead of ending their conversation right there, she patted Lorgar's shoulder and slowly said, "By the way, I forgot to tell you. There are over 100 witches like Phyllis in Neverwinter."

"What?"

Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan was stunned and began to wonder, "Over 100 witches with infinite life? When did the miracles of the Three Gods start happening so frequently?"

"Come on." Ashes curled her lips into a smile. "You've still got a long way to go. You'll never have to worry about finding a suitable opponent there."

...

Beside Ashes, Lorgar also occasionally ran into another witch, Andrea. She had witnessed this blonde witch's powerful Magic Longbow on the Burning Stage. Though she had never fought against her, she thought Ashes was quite right about her. She was a noble just like the King of Graycastle. They were cut off the same cloth. The Wolf Girl always felt distanced from Andrea, as if she was living in a different world.

Every move Andrea made was so graceful, be it when she was talking to the others or when she was gazing far out to the sea by herself. Watching her, Lorgar began to notice that she had a lot of shortcomings in comparison to Andrea.

Princess Lorgar decided to give it a try anyways and said hello to Andrea when nobody was around. The blonde witch greeted her calmly, not showing as much warmth and hospitality as Drow Silvermoon did.

However, when she put forward the question that Ashes failed to answer, Andrea suddenly became enthusiastic.

The blonde witch said, "As for this question... of course, Ashes wouldn't be able to tell you anything. That muscle-brained witch can barely count to a hundred, she knows nothing about managing a city. His Majesty Roland's policies are way too complicated. I had to ponder about them over and over before understanding their logic." She paused for a moment and asked, "But are you sure that you really want me to tell you? It's much harder to understand than fighting."

"Yes." Lorgar nodded seriously. "My father said that there's a common truth in everything. Learning knowledge in other fields can also promote my fighting skills."

"It's obviously nonsense..." Andrea rolled her eyes back and slightly sighed. "Fine, I'll tell you. If the king just buys Blackwater with gold royals as you suggested, Neverwinter will have to spend some of its wealth to get what it wants, right?"

"All transactions in the world are like that," Lorgar confirmed.

"So let's assume that these deals go flawlessly one hundred percent of the time, and 20 years later, the king will see no change in his kingdom, except the loss of a large number of gold royals."

"Lo-Loss?" The Wolf Girl was startled. "Why do you call it a loss? Doesn't his current plan cost him much more?"

"Of course not." Andrea put her hair up, bent down, and started drawing on the ground with a stick. "Now that the Mojin immigrants in the Southern Territory have been assimilated into Graycastle, any expenses they make will eventually be circulated back into Graycastle's economy, this is because all the things the Mojins need to buy come from Neverwinter, therefore, the income they receive will eventually make its way into His Majesty's hands in a process known as "the circular flow of income". During this process, the overall amount of wealth circulating in the kingdom will gradually grow and eventually reach an astonishing amount over that 20 year period. To achieve this, His Majesty only needs to invest in this initial stage, but even this initial investment can't be considered a loss as the wealth is circulating through the cities of the kingdom."

Chapter 820: The Journey

Lorgar stared at the circles drawn by Andrea on the ground for a good while before she voiced out her thoughts. "But if you want to keep this circulation going, you've got to keep investing money... so, there's still a large amount of wealth that isn't in the hands of the great chief."

"That's it... This is what makes His Majesty different from all those other nobles, and it took me a while before I could figure out this point." Andrea then drew a larger circle around the small circles. "From the very beginning, he's regarded the entire Graycastle as his own domain. Given that, no matter which city accumulates the wealth, it still belongs to him."

"But he's the king, so shouldn't it be natural for him to think that way?"

Andrea retorted, "When Wildflame was the strongest clan, were you able to lord over clans in the Silver Stream Oasis? I'm guessing you couldn't even control the other clans inside Iron Sand City. It's the same for the Four Kingdoms. The nobles are like your clan chiefs. They won't let anyone else intervene in the affairs of their land and neither would they consider any other noble's domain as their homeland."

"..." Lorgar remained silent for a while. "We can't control our subjects simply by thinking them ours."

"Yes. You're much smarter than Ashes. Stay away from her in the future or your brain will be slowly filled with mud, like hers." Andrea patted Lorgar's shoulder. "The key lies in the combination of military might and the implementation of His Majesty's policies. The former can discourage the nobles from having any second thoughts, while the latter will gradually help to centralize the kingdom's power. This is a brilliant innovation. What's even more amazing, is that the king had already put this into practice since

the beginning. Only having stayed in Neverwinter for so long can I now recognize the intricacies of this plan."

"It's indeed a bit... complicated." Lorgar scratched her head, and she was a bit surprised. She never expected that this blonde-haired girl who usually distanced herself from the others would answer her question so enthusiastically and in such great detail. Her guess was that Andrea might have been eagerly looking forward to sharing her findings and thoughts with someone else, but had failed to find a person to talk to.

"Of course, politics is 10,000 times more complicated than fighting." said Andrea, proudly, "and that's just one part. The other part is that the king is going to acquire more than just wealth—he'll also have you guys."

"Us?"

"This principle is much simpler. When Mojin immigrants get food and houses through working for the king, they would become part of this circulation. You'll gradually get used to this lifestyle of using your wages to buy all kinds of goods and comforts produced by Graycastle. In the end, you'll never be able to stop living in this kind of a comfortable manner and will eventually become a genuine citizen of the kingdom."

Andrea impaled the wooden stick into the ground, wiped her hands clean, and stood up. "This is inevitable. The oases are shrinking, and the survival of the Mojin clans are being threatened. Under this circumstance, the king has offered you a way to survive without fighting each other for water, so more and more Mojins will choose to leave the desert. Meanwhile, there are many deserted lands lying in the Southern Territory. It's only natural for the king to bring the Mojin people there to reclaim those lands—and create wealth for him."

She paused for a moment and asked, "Now do you understand? By doing so, 20 years later, His Majesty Roland will not only get all

the Blackwater that he desires but also an accumulated wealth as well as most of the Mojins of the Southernmost Region. Do you still think that buying Blackwater from the Iron Sand City would be a better option?"

Lorgar did not answer but instead faintly felt her heartache. As compared to the answer itself, what shook her more was Andrea's attitude—She believed that Andrea revealed all the reasons behind the king's arrangements probably not out of trust, but because no Mojin could reverse this situation.

Lorgar admired this intelligent blonde witch who could actually figure out the king's true intentions. However, she respected the great chief himself even more. He always thought of the bigger picture and was able to become an irreplaceable figure in his subjects' hearts through meticulous planning. Not to mention his revolutionizing ideas. She believed that if he had been born in Iron Sand City, he would have definitely become an outstanding warrior.

Perhaps he was the example she should chase after.

"Thank you for your guidance, I feel my fighting skills have been further enhanced!" Lorgar said while making a fist.

"My pleasure, as long as you can understand... wait, what? Did you just say fighting skills?"

"Yes. I'll go practice now, so please excuse me." Lorgar said before she turned around without a moment to spare and hurriedly ran for a nearby dune. There just happened to be an open and gravelly ground that was suitable for combat training.

"So you turned out to be just like Ashes... an idiot."

After running for more than a hundred steps, the Wolf Girl still could hear Andrea call her an idiot, but the blonde witch did not sound as cold as she had been before.

A week later, Echo informed Lorgar that the Wildflame clan had

officially decided to move to the Southern Territory. As agreed by both parties, this immigration plan would be carried out in three phases to reduce Graycastle's burden, and the lands the clan was granted with were the most fertile fields near the estuary in the old town, which were located between Clearwater Bay and the port.

The whole migration process would last more than a year, and the first batch of immigrants would arrive in several weeks. In order to properly settle the former ruling clan, the Osha Princess, who was missing Neverwinter the most, volunteered to extend her stay in the Port of Clearwater. Her decision was approved by the king, but Ashes, Andrea and Hummingbird would still leave as planned, taking "The Roland" to the Western Region.

As for whether Lorgar would leave with the witches or stay behind to wait for her clan, Echo allowed her to choose for herself.

The Wolf Girl did not think twice before she chose to leave with Ashes.

She believed that her father and brother could properly handle inter-clan affairs without her. The Southern Territory was no longer a place where survival opportunities needed to be won by force and duels. In this place, even small clans could manage to get their stomachs full, not to mention the Wildflame clan. More importantly, she did not want to cause any misunderstanding by meeting them shortly after she abandoned her right of succession. As she had to leave sooner or later, she decided to leave earlier with the witches.

The things about Neverwinter and the Witch Union which she heard from Ashes and Andrea, filled her heart with wild expectations. Be it the legendary combat witches, the formidable enemies in the wilderness hiding under the cloak of the Red Mist, the great chief who did not have enough strength to strangle a chicken(according to Ashes), she looked forward to meeting them all.

The next day, Echo sent them on to the steel ship with a smile.

Standing on the deck, Lorgar felt that those large Concrete Boats were nothing as compared to this steady steel ship. The amount of metal used to build the hull for this ship might already exceed that of all the Mojins' weapons and armors. With mixed feelings in her heart, she held the railing on the deck and dropped her fluffy ears as she nodded to Echo to say goodbye.

With a deep whistle from its horn, "The Roland", carrying the witches and Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan, slowly but steadily sailed towards the Western Region.

Chapter 821: A Meeting

"My lord, your guest is here," said a maid who pulled the curtain and poked her head in.

"Send him in," Otto Luoxi handed a silver royal to the bar girl beside him and said, "I need a private minute with him. I'll call you later."

"Yes, my lord!"

"Is this the covert place you mentioned?" The man who came in removed his hood and glanced around. "If I hadn't seen the Luoxi guards standing outside, I would think I'd come to the wrong place."

"It isn't easy these days to see you, I had to take extra precautions," replied Otto, grinning.

The guest was Hill Fawkes, a member of the emissary delegation who "betrayed the King of Dawn, killed the guards and knights and escaped from the City of Glow with some fallen minions". Ever since Yorko's secret departure, Appen Moya, the King of Dawn became so furious that he claimed it was a blatant provocation to and contempt of the Kingdom of Dawn on Graycastle's part. He also said that it was a witch that killed his father and he absolutely did not allow such an evil existence in his domain.

Of course, Otto knew far more than that. For example, that while Appen was searching for the witches, he also dispatched a group of knights to chase the emissary delegation. He ordered that any member of the emissary delegation, other than Yorko, could be killed on the spot, especially the witches who dared to collude with the neighbor country. At the same time, investigations were carried out in the King's City. Denise, a businesswoman who had an intimate relationship with the ambassador, was taken to the palace several times for inquiries. Hill and the others who voluntarily stayed as contacts, on the contrary, disappeared.

Otto did not hear anything from Hill until a few months later when the event no longer received so much public attention.

This was their first meeting after their last departure.

"Would you like some drinks?" Otto patted the soft couch beside him and asked, "I guess you usually have no chance to enjoy it."

Hill did not sit down; instead, he walked to the window and looked around. "We're on the second floor. Where's the reliable path you mentioned in the confidential letter?"

Otto, the eldest son of the Luoxis, sighed, stood up and opened a board under the soft couch, revealing the dark passage beneath it.

"Slide down from here, you'll arrive at the back garden. In the yard, you'll find a secret door and a dry well. You can choose either way to leave."

"Nobody else knows this path?"

"Of course, both the back garden and the tavern belong to the Luoxis." He said, shrugging, "No wonder Sir Yorko said you're a fox. You're still as cautious as you were before."

"If I were not like this, I'm afraid I would have been hanged on a gallows now," replied Hill, who took a coin from his pocket and dropped it down the tunnel. After listening to the sound for a while, he closed the board. "If you want to tell me any information in the future, write me an encrypted letter. It's not safe to meet in this way."

"But an encrypted letter is also not safe for me. If the information in the palace is leaked, King Appen will certainly suspect our families." Otto sighed and said, "He's no more my good friend who talked about everything with me."

Hill raised his eyebrows without denying. "Does the King of Dawn have any new plan?"

"He intends to attack the Church of Hermes and avenge for his

father," Otto slowly told him what he heard during the court meeting, "although the ministers tried to dissuade him, His Majesty still persisted. Now they start to collect grains in the City of Glow. When snows melt after the Months of Demons, he'll immediately take actions. The royal knightage will go together with Duke Carb who is in charge of the Western Field."

"No wonder the porridge is a bronze royal more expensive than before... Fortunately, the supplies in the Kingdom of Dawn are rich enough. If it were in Graycastle, the lord would not prepare for the war during the Months of Demons unless he wanted to trigger riots." Hill said meditatively, "Is there any problem with Hermes?"

Otto knew why he asked. Though the church and Graycastle had a battle on Coldwind Ridge and it was said that the Holy City was severely defeated, later it was reported that both of them retreated to their own domain. The ministers all agreed that the church might have suffered heavy losses, but had not been completely defeated. Otherwise, the King of Graycastle should have led the army to loot the Holy City. As the core city of the church, it should be where all the wealth church had accumulated for hundreds of years was.

Maybe Appen was deeply impressed with the God's Punishment Warriors brought by the Pure Witches. He just dispatched more scouts for further information without any further actions.

Since he changed his mind, it was possible that he had discovered something there.

As for whether it was to avenge for his father or take advantage of the chaos, it did not matter at all.

"His Majesty didn't tell us many details. But I heard from the businessmen coming back from the west that many refugees appeared in the old Holy City."

"Refugees?" Hill nodded while rubbing his chin. "I'll report this to

Neverwinter."

"There's one more thing," Otto hesitated for a while and said, "in the court meeting last month, the Minister of Foreign Affairs mentioned Graycastle. He said that Roland Wimbledon could not be counted as the real ruler of Graycastle, as he hasn't either held enthronement or lived in the palace. What's more, many nobles in Graycastle oppose him, especially in the Eastern Region. Since he trampled on the alliance of the two countries, the Kingdom of Dawn needs to be cautious of him and suppress his power. For example, We should support those nobles to resist the rule of Wimbledon."

"Well," Hill immediately became serious and asked, "What did the King of Dawn respond?"

"His Majesty did not respond immediately, but his expression... showed that he has a great interest in the matter."

Otto did not know why he told these things to Hill... or, to Roland. Judging from the current situation, he could see the relationship between Graycastle and Dawn was deteriorating. He should have stood on the side of Appen Moya, just as the family of Luoxi had assisted John Moore's royalties for generations.

But he could not persuade himself to accept His Majesty's policy. Killing all witches meant that Andrea Quinn should also be killed, who was definitely not evil as Appen described. He had tried many times to explain the differences between witches and Pure Witches from the church to His Majesty, but his explanations were futile.

Appen no longer regarded him as his hand.

Otto also found that although he still addressed Appen as His Majesty, he did not have the same respect as he had for the old king.

He had pondered over it for a long time. Maybe he admitted that he was unable to change the situation and had to put his hope on

Graycastle. In Neverwinter, he met Andrea who had a free and easy life. In order to let her continue to have such a life, he hoped that Roland's rule could continue.

"I see," said Hill in a lower voice. "Don't worry. His plan won't succeed."

Otto nodded, took a deep breath and asked, "Then... can you tell me how Miss Quinn is doing these days?"

Chapter 822: Traitors

"She's fine. She lived on the Sleeping Island in Fjords for a while and has returned to Neverwinter now." Hill laughed and said, "I heard that Miss Quinn is especially close to Princess Tilly, His Majesty's sister. So His Majesty will definitely treat her as a distinguished guest."

Afterwards, Hill told him some trivia about Andrea. Otto learned that Andrea loved playing cards and improving her marksmanship. She occasionally argued with another card-playing buddy, but on the whole, she got along well with them.

Her news made him nearly forget about the passage of time.

Until he heard arguments outside the room.

"What happened?" Hill stopped talking and quickly walked to the door, peeping through the door slot, and then he said, "Something is wrong on the first floor."

"Let me send someone to check it," Otto indicated Hill to sit down first. He then yelled toward the outside, "Who's making noise outside? Go to see what happened!"

"Yes, my lord," replied the maid who had been at the door.

"Maybe someone is drunk." He then said to Hill, drawing the blanket on him, "It's unusual, but does happen in the tavern. You mentioned Miss Quinn participated in a Neverwinter hunting competition. Who won?"

Instead of replying, Hill raised a finger to his lips as a sign of silence and gently leaned his ear on the door.

After a few seconds, his face clouded over.

"Those people downstairs are armored and armed."

"What?" Otto was a little stunned.

"I heard the sounds of iron boots and sword hilts hitting the

ground and chairs. Do you think anyone would wear a full set of armor when drinking?" Hill no longer waited for the maid but directly opened the soft couch. "I don't think a drunk would like to dress up as a knight. We're in trouble."

"How... how is it possible?" Otto frowned and said, "Please believe me. I absolutely didn't..."

"Of course. If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't be here," Hill interrupted.

"Well... We can meet next time. You leave first. If they're really coming for you, I can stop them." Otto replied. "After this meeting, I don't know when I will learn about Andrea again," he thought regretfully.

"Won't you leave with me?" Hill was slightly surprised and asked, "Apparently, they aren't coming for a visit. You'd better go back to your own domain."

"Rest assured. I'm the eldest son of Luoxi family. They can't do anything to me," Otto shook his head. He did not tell his father that he tried to rescue witches and secretly contacted Roland's scouts. If people outside the room came to search for the emissary delegation members while he ran away, it might raise the suspicion of the king. Then he would really be in trouble. "No one knows the secret path, but it isn't difficult to find it. If they saw an empty room, they would be suspicious. I'll stay in the room. Only in this way can you withdraw more safely."

"Then, good luck." Hill did not insist. He loosed his hands and slid into the secret path.

Otto rearranged the blanket and quilt and lay on the soft couch again.

A short while later, he heard heavy patters of footsteps at the staircases accompanied by the scraping of metal. The maid who left to inquire about the situation never appeared again.

Without knocking or asking for admission, they directly broke in.

A group of full-armored knights rushed into the room.

"What're you doing?" Otto furiously questioned, "This is the private property of Earl Luoxi! Are you planning to commit treason?" He intended to stand up and drive the rude knights out of the tavern. Out of his expectation, the knights stepped forward and tightly pressed him on the soft couch.

"I'm sorry, Sir. We aren't committing treason, but you are." The leading knight replied, shrugging. Though they wore the gold armors and royal knightage emblems on their chests, Otto found that he had never met this group of knights.

Hell, where did they come from?

"Let me go!" He struggled and shouted, "That's a slander!"

"Say this to His Majesty," said the knight. "You fail to live up to his trust, my lord."

When he heard the name Appen Moya, Otto's heart suddenly sank.

...

It was two days later when he saw His Majesty again.

"I heard that you haven't eaten anything for two days, but insist to see me?" Appen said. He still seemed to be a little weary, but looked more mature. His eyes revealed emotions which Otto was unfamiliar with. "Now your requirement is satisfied. Start to eat."

"Where am I?" Otto asked in a hoarse voice, hands on the steel bars, "Why did you do so? What did you do to my father?"

"Are you not satisfied with the room?" Appen said, looking around, "It's decorated according to your room in the Duke mansion. It's not large, but you have a bed, a desk, chairs, and a bookcase. I think you can live a comfortable life here." He paused

and said, "As for where it is... Of course, it's under the palace. I can only feel at ease when you're kept here."

Otto gritted his teeth and said, "Your Majesty, I need to talk to you. I didn't..."

"Betray me?" The King of Dawn interrupted him, "Do you think I'll still believe these lies and continue to be deceived by you? It took me two months to find some clues about the witches. I have never thought that you were actually involved. You asked Yorko, the Ambassador of Graycastle, to 'Black Money' to participate in the auction, and also helped him leave the City of Glow. Wasn't that betrayal?" He raised his voice, as he apparently did not want to suppress his anger anymore. "That day in the palace, didn't you hear how the King of Graycastle abandon the covenant and trample on my father's feelings?"

"I..."

"Do you want to talk about the traitors or the witches who should go to hell?" Appen asked in a tone full of hatred. "Enough, Otto Luoxi! If you were not my friend since childhood, the eldest son of the three noble families, I would have long sent you to the gallows! I still need the support of the three families now. But that doesn't mean I need you forever. This is my last chance for you. Don't force me to do that!"

Otto's heart sank at his words. He had never seen his playmate show such a ferocious look. Thinking of those "royal knights" he never saw before, he suddenly understood something.

Perhaps they had lost the trust of the new king since the death of the old king.

"But the way, you just asked what happened to your father." Before leaving, Appen suddenly said in a cold voice, "Nothing happens to him. He still attended today's court meeting. As long as you eat food, Earl Luoxi will still be a good loyal noble. Stop this stupid hunger strike. That's good for both of us. If you persist, I

have to take the hard way."

Chapter 823: Dark Clouds over Hermes

Although it was snowing slightly, it was a fair day in the Northern Region.

Nail was rubbing the oil stick on the gun barrel out of sheer boredom. He occasionally glanced at the Impassable Mountain Range with the telescope. Since they had been stationed here, he did not observe the mountain as frequently as he did before. He usually checked it two or three times a day and spent the rest of time on maintaining the flintlock and chatting with his companions.

Maintenance of weapons required a person to be detail-oriented. Every half a month or so, they would get a portion of a thumb-long "oil stick" wrapped in hard paper. It was heard that the oil stick was made of abandoned oil from the soap factory. When they used it, they needed to heat it up and then rub it onto the special double-ended brush, which had a large and a small brush on either end, to be inserted into the gun barrel and cartridge. In the past, every squad was equipped with only one set of cleaning tools. But nowadays as there were more and more factories and workshops in Neverwinter, the brushes became accessories to the guns and everyone had one.

Of course, when there was no bonfire, they could heat the oil stick by body or mouth temperature. Though the soldiers in the First Army was forbidden to eat the abandoned oil, some people still secretly rubbed it on their dried food as a seasoning.

As a squad leader, he usually chose to turn a blind eye.

After all, the teams responsible for guarding the Northern Region were basically veterans. Some of them were even over 20 years older than him. If he had not attended the primary education class, he would not be selected as the squad leader. He could only smile to those who used to be his neighbors in the past.

After assembling the parts one by one, the rifle became shiny again. He pressed the trigger several times to ensure the empty gun could normally shoot before he once again checked the front again.

He was still unable to forget the defense battle in autumn. Once he closed his eyes, the image of that young woman wearing a red cope would emerge in his mind. It was in this blockhouse that he witnessed her death. He knew that she was an enemy and a Pure Witch of the church, but her struggling in the gunshots still made him uncomfortable. If it were not Iron Axe's command and his loyalty to His Majesty, he would have chosen to leave the army and return to his previous job as a steam engine operator in the mining area.

Although he still served in the First Army, Nail made up his mind to leave the machine gun team but become an observer who protected machine gunners. He knew that he was self-deceiving, but he had no way to overcome the obstacle in his heart.

The battlefield, which had been soaked with blood, was restored to the ordinary look as if nothing had happened. The barbed wires had long been removed, leaving only a dozen of crooked stakes. Trenches were also filled with snow. If there were no blockhouses, one could not distinguish this field from the wild field around. Except them, no one knew that over 2,000 people had once died here, just several hundred meters in front of the first line of stakes.

"Chief, we're running out of firewood. Let me go to fetch some," said a soldier who was nearly as young as Nail. The firewood he mentioned was the stakes once used to fix the barbed wires. He said, "Otherwise the other squad will blame us for not adding more firewood after using it."

"But it's duty time now..." Nail shook his head and said, "You may be seen by others."

"They won't say anything," another veteran said, laughing. "It's so cold today. No one will care if we go to get firewood to warm us

up. It has been several months since the cowards of the church retreated. Do you think they'll come today?"

His words were agreed by everyone else.

Nail also knew the veteran was right. At first, Iron Axe required 500 soldiers in the camp keeping stationed at the foot of Coldwind Ridge to guard against the last struggle of the church or the invasion of the demonic beasts. However, to their surprise, no enemies appeared. Maybe the superiors believed that enemies would not come, so they transferred over 200 soldiers to other places and divided the rest of soldiers into patrol teams, whose mission was to stay in the blockhouses to monitor in the northwestern direction in turns.

Nail hesitated but finally agreed with that soldier. He said, "You alone will be too slow. Go there with more people."

The soldier whistled and replied, "Yes, Head!"

Nail turned back and picked up the telescope to look toward the snow-covered field. What he could see was the white snow. Nothing changed.

Just when he was about to wipe his pistol, he suddenly saw two or three dark spots which were especially striking in a white background.

He was startled, and then shouted, "Wait!"

The soldiers who had reached the stairs stopped immediately, and the others around the stove hurriedly stood up and drew close. "What's wrong?"

Nail wiped the lens with his wool neckline and looked back in the northwestern direction. He saw more dark spots. He held his breath and observed them for a moment, only to find that they were a group of people slowly walking in the snow.

"Blow the horn to alert the soldiers! Someone is approaching the front!"

"Woo—woo—woo—woo—" As the horn sounded, the entire camp was seething at once.

With a rifle in his hand, Nail led his squad members out of the blockhouse and stood in a line around the blockhouse, placing their gun barrels on the sandbags covered with snow. As the trench was filled with snow, they had to shorten the front line, assisting the heavy machine gun to defend.

"Are they from the church?" someone asked.

"Who else will come?" muttered the former veteran unhappily. "Coldwind Ridge has long been abandoned by His Majesty. Only people in Hermes will come from that direction. I underestimated their guts."

"I hope they're not the monster-like warriors. We don't have the support of the Artillery Battalion this time."

"We have nothing to be afraid of. I don't believe they can run quickly in the heavy snow." The veteran spat. "If they wear armors, they'll sink in the snow and become our targets."

"Head, their distance?"

"At least 1,000 meters away," replied Nail, frowning at the suspicious group. "It's so strange. Something is wrong..."

"What's wrong?"

"They... aren't like the God's Punishment Army."

"Does the church send the Judgement Army?" All soldiers were relieved. If they were just ordinary Judgement Warriors, it would be impossible for them to approach in the crossfire of machine guns on the blockhouse.

"No, not the Judgement Army... They're not armored. Actually, they're so ragged." said Nail, holding the telescope and said in surprise, "Gosh, how did these people come down from the mountain? They're like... a group of refugees!"

"Or maybe the God's Punishment Warriors disguised as refugees," the veteran shrugged. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I'm going to tell them to stop!" Nail said without turning back, "Otherwise, the other squads will shoot them!"

Chapter 824: The Symbol of the Fall

As he approached the front, he could clearly see the group of refugees without the telescope.

Men, women, old men, and children. They were all ragged and staggering, looking weak and frail. They were even weaker than common militia, not to mention the Judgement Army.

Nail was more sure about his judgment.

But he knew that the church had a pill which could enhance the taker's physical strength within a second. Considering that they might use the Berserk Pills, Nail told his squad members to hold up the heavy machine guns within the suppressing shooting range before he approached alone and shouted, "This is the border defense line of the Kingdom of Graycastle. You're forbidden to step forward. Freeze, or we'll fire!"

Apparently, those people also saw him. They did not stop moving; instead, they accelerated their pace in excitement.

Nail shot twice upward and repeated his warning, but they continued to run toward him.

"Mr. Nail, come back!" Cried the veteran behind him. "They don't even know what flintlocks are. They won't stop no matter how loud you shout!"

Hearing that, Nail hurriedly shouted that he would shoot arrows, and those people finally responded. Nevertheless, after a moment's hesitation, they continued to move forward and waved both hands toward the First Army, yelling while running.

He could only tell that they were crying for help.

"No, stop!" Nail was still trying to stop them until he was dragged back to the defensive line by his teammates. When those people crossed the first line of stakes, flames spurted from the two blockhouses at the same time. Whistling bullets flew overhead and

fell near the stakes, splashing snow dust and submerging their cries.

There was immediately a mist of blood among the crowd.

This time they finally stopped moving forward.

Except for the refugees who had been shot and fell, the others fell on their knees one after another and then threw themselves down in the snow. Terrified as they were, they did not turn around. It seemed that they were more afraid of some even more dreadful things behind them.

"Stop! Stop! Don't fire!" Nail took off his jacket, got up and waved toward the blockhouses, risking being hit by a stray bullet. The machine gun squads finally released their triggers. Probably they noticed his strange move, two more squads left the blockhouses and approached the front line.

Walking through the still-smoky field, a five-man squad held the rifles, followed Nail and slowly approached the strangers. Those strangers were trembling but dared not to move again in spite of the chilling snow.

"Where are you from?"

No one answered.

"Haven't you heard the question of our squad leader?" cried the veteran. "If you don't answer it, you'll be treated as spies and hanged."

"My, my, my... my lord," someone finally spoke this time. "We... we all came from Hermes."

"So you're believers of the church?" Nail asked, frowning.

"Yes... No, no, we aren't," answered the man, banging his head on the ground again and again. "In the past, we were deceived by the church. But we regret now! The deities did not protect the church. We were wrong. Please give us some food."

His words stirred up the crowd. They begged, "My lord, please, please give us some oatmeal. My child is starving!"

"The army of the church was after us. We had to drop our luggage."

"My lord, I haven't eaten anything for three days."

"So they would rather be shot by machine guns than run away?" Nail thought. He could not bear to look at the withered faces and bleeding bodies. After they fled from the Holy City, Graycastle was their only hope to survive. He reached his dried food in his waist pocket and was about to throw it to them while a veteran grabbed him by his wrist.

"Hey, what're you doing?"

"Give them some food."

"Are you sure? These guys are believers of the church." The veteran lowered his voice and stressed, "They're our enemies."

"But now they aren't. Didn't you hear it? They admitted that they had been deceived."

"Hmm, deceived?" The veteran replied disdainfully, "When they can't survive, they'll even worship demons. Compared with those Judgement Army soldiers fighting for the church, these people are just timid drifters."

"Head, Uncle Sang is right. Maybe they made the weapons and armors used by the church army."

"Who knows whether they've hurt the First Army?"

"They deserve it. That's what they'll end up with since they've fought against His Majesty. I'll definitely not give any food to them."

Nail took a deep breath and made a gesture to tell them to be quiet. He said, "Listen to me. We all know what Border Town was like before His Majesty came. At that time everyone was deceived

by the church. But His Majesty didn't abandon us or treat us as betrayers. Then how could we despise them? Of course, I agree that we should spare none of those who committed a crime. Give them some food, and then bring them for interrogation. That's what we should do."

"Eh, well..."

"And His Majesty once said in his book that the Kingdom of Graycastle is a whole. As long as someone isn't guilty and is willing to pay allegiance to Graycastle, he should be treated as a subject of the king, rather than being persecuted and excluded." Nail continued to say, "If there are innocent people among them and we watch them die in front us, aren't we against His Majesty's wish?"

The crowd fell into silence for a moment. Then the veteran grinned and said, "Head Nail, now I know why Sir Blair chose you as our squad leader. You've become so different since you went to school. In the past, you always stumbled when speaking in front of a crowd. If Iron Head knows it, he'll be proud of you."

Apparently, he did not agree with Nail's remark that "anyone who pays allegiance to Graycastle is the subject of Graycastle", but since everyone in the First Army admired King Roland, they did not oppose Nail's decision anymore. The veteran said, "But you can't directly throw food to them. That'll cause a chaos. Pick up some starving ones and order them to come up one by one."

...

As more and more soldiers came, Eagle Face, the deputy battalion commander who was in charge of Northern Region garrison, also came to the front line. This tall man, who had round eyes and a pointed mouth like a grey eagle of Western Region, was one of the excellent hunters who joined the Militia with Iron Axe. He asked, "Can someone explain what happened?"

Nail stepped forward and saluted, and then briefly told him the incident.

"Escaped from the Holy City?" Eagle Face asked thoughtfully. He ordered them to bring a refugee forward and said, "What happened in Hermes? If you tell me the situation in details, I can give you food."

"My, my lord..." The refugee nervously swallowed and replied, "The Cathedral of the New Holy City... collapsed..."

"What?" Nail was shocked for a moment. He had heard that the Hermes Cathedral was a symbol of the immortality of the church. Before the completion of His Majesty's Miracle Building, the tower had been the tallest building built by mankind. At the start of the defensive battle under the Coldwind Ridge, he also had dreamed to follow His Majesty into the Hermes Plateau and occupy the tower that could reach the skies in the legend. But this magnificent building... did not exist anymore?

"I heard that a big pit suddenly appeared below the church and the entire tower fell..." The refugees stumbled, "The Judgement Army blocked the scene, but a big building disappeared without a trace, and the mighty bang... Everyone knew what happened. The church is over, my lord, the deities no longer favor it. The outside residents have begun to flee. We were a little later, and then we ran into the Judgement Army who was chasing us. Among the hundreds of people, only we escaped..."

"That means the Holy City is a mess now?"

"A mess, a mess..." That man nodded and said, "Beside the Western Gate, the Southern and East Gates are also open and unguarded. Obviously, the guards have also run away. I heard that the situation in the old Holy City is even worse. I really haven't seen any caravans come into the city for a long time."

"Got it. You're excused."

After the soldiers took the men away, Eagle Face looked excited. "This is an unexpected good news. Maybe we'll occupy Hermes before the arrival of the army."

Nails naturally knew why the deputy battalion commander was glad about. If he became the first Commander to lead the army into the Holy City, it would undoubtedly be his great achievement. But Nail did not pay much attention to whether he would win more achievements; instead, he cared more about those refugees who had suffered hunger and coldness.

After Nail told his concern, Eagle Face looked at him thoughtfully and answered after a moment, "It's impossible for the camp to keep these outsiders. Give them some tents and food, and allow them to encamp in places where the heavy machine guns cover."

"In this utterly unsheltered field?" Nail said worriedly, "If the weather becomes worse and there is heavy rain or storm at night, they probably won't survive the night."

"As the head of the garrison in the Northern Region, I must give top priority to the safety of the First Army." Eagle Face was unmoved and said, "I will inform Duke Kant to accommodate them. Before the arrival of the helpers in Deepvalley Town, these people have to pray to have a good luck."

Chapter 825: The Dusk Tolling

Tucker Thor climbed up the fortified city wall of the New Holy City and slowly walked to the blotchy parapet.

It was probably the most peaceful Months of Demons after the establishment of the stronghold.

As a tactic to defend against demonic beasts, the city wall was cleaned up regularly, covered with no ice or snow, but stood out in the bleak, vast whiteness like an ash-gray giant all the year round, no matter how big the snow was. At present, however, Tucker could easily leave his footprints on the snow-covered wall.

All traces of the battle had been wiped out by thick snows, including lumps and bumps on the flagstone pavement, and blood that seeped through the crevices between the slabs, as if nothing had ever happened. It would be an incredible scene in the past.

Nonetheless, the recent drastic changes had completed overshadowed such aberrancy.

Tucker had thought the Holy City of Hermes would be razed to the ground by swarms of demonic beasts. In fact, all the believers had determined to remain in the cathedral to the last, but they had not anticipated that few enemies had actually appeared. Those who did come to attack had not even made an attempt to crawl up the city wall.

While everybody was still absorbed in profound astonishment and celebration delight, the subsequent event, however, came as a heavy blow in such a cruel fashion that they were once again reminded of the volatility of the deities.

As the church had suffered a great loss during the war against Graycastle, the top priority in winter had become the election of three new archbishops and other senior executives. In order to maintain the order in the Holy City and restore believers' faith in

God, many young believers had been promoted to key positions. Tucker had also been elevated from Chief Justice to one of the acting bishops.

Just when the situation was about to turn for the better, the abrupt collapse of the cathedral at a windless night, which had killed a number of senior executives, destroyed all hopes of the war survivors. At that time, Tucker had happened to be patrolling the campsite and therefore had narrowly escaped death.

Nobody knew how it had happened, although rumors about a great fire in the core underground area beneath the church remained afloat. It was also rumored that the area had once been attacked by demonic beasts. Yet without the permission of the pope, they could not access the secret trap on their own, notwithstanding the mysterious disappearance of the acting pope Reverend Tayfun.

The sag of the Hermes Cathedral could be considered as a more miserable defeat than the war. The loss of the war could be attributed to the poor and confusing communications between commanders and soldiers, or to the treachery of their enemies, but the collapse of the Tower of Babel, which represented the spirit of the church, meant that they had been abandoned by God.

The incident had almost become their last straw in consideration of their already precarious situation. Although the church had blocked the scene immediately, the news still spread out. Residents in the Holy City started to flee Hermes, beginning from masons and tradesmen living in the outer part of the city, who did not put much faith in the church in the first place. Then, like a contagious plague, terror slowly spread to the outer city and the inner city, except this time there was no divine cure for the disease.

Tucker had once organized a reverent pray ceremony on the city wall with all the members of the Judgment Army and priests, hoping that the deities would once again divert their attention to this last human stronghold and protect living beings behind it

from the evil power in Hell, but the deities had not responded to their pray.

Tucker Thor remembered that Pope Mayne had once taught him that power was the only means to defy evil. However, he could not think of anything other than praying to God to re-establish the church's integrity.

"Your Eminence... here you are." A woman's voice came from behind. "The army responsible for pursuing fugitives has returned, but..."

"Some of the units fled, right?" Tucker turned around and said in a soft voice.

As he had expected, the reporter was Farrina, one of the survived commanders of the Judgment Army who took over his previous position. The resemblance on Farrina's face reminded Tucker another woman, Alicia, a warrior from the advance battalion who had sacrificed herself for the church. As one of the few women Judgement Warriors, they both had a tough character. Alicia had fought to her death when over half of her comrades had been killed as demonic beasts had approached the wall of the cathedral. Farrina, on the other hand, assumed the critical role of the commander of the Judgment Army when their very survival was threatened to keep the situation from getting out of hand.

Farrina stomped indignantly. "Yes. Those new recruits who just joined recently cannot be of any use. More than 20 people went to catch fugitives but only one or two returned. I know they haven't received much training, but it's very unlikely that they'll be killed by refugees. If I ever find them, I'll definitely let them know the consequence of betrayal!"

Tucker sighed. "It's inevitable. How many people left in the Judgement Army?"

"564. They're all guarding the inner city gate of the Holy City, so they should be able to stop residents in the inner city from

leaving."

Tucker knew that these soldiers plus around 100 God's Punishment Warriors down the ruin of the church were the only forces left. He concluded that human beings were doomed, for it was impossible for these 100-odd soldiers to stop demons.

Tucker had learned this powerful enemy from Pope Mayne. What the church had been striving to achieve was to help human beings survive the Battle of Doomsday and ensure the continuation of the human race. That was the reason they developed powerful warriors like the God's Punishment Army. But that was not sufficient. The church also had to unify the Four Kingdoms before the great battle and combine all human power in order to gain the eventual victory.

What was the point of keeping holding this plateau stronghold when there was no hope?

There was little he could do, but for those 500 odd people, they could be alleviated of the burden of protecting the whole human race.

Tucker finally broke the silence. "Go to the east. The Kingdom of Everwinter or the Kingdom of Wolfheart, whichever it is, pick somewhere close to the coast. We can build a new holy city there."

He believed in that case, even if demons invaded the Four Kingdoms, they could still, if lucky, flee by boat from the harbor to some distant islands and spend the rest of their life there before human beings were wiped out.

Farrina was stunned. "Leave Hermes? But Your Eminence, if we leave, who will defend against demonic beasts?"

"We can blame Graycastle if demonic beasts invade the inner continent from the breach. Our current top priority is to reserve our strength. We can always build a new cathedral but we can't let our believers suffer. When the Four Kingdoms are permeated with

demonic beasts, people will naturally remember our power again."

"Demonic beasts don't really matter, as they aren't our true enemies. The greatest threat is from the depth of Hell, but there's nothing you guys can do about it. What I can do at this last moment is to keep you as far away from the battlefield as possible. You've done enough to protect human beings," Tucker said within himself.

Farrina's slender brows furrowed. "Those pious believers who resolve to fall with the Holy City may not agree to abandon Hermes."

Tucker replied after a moment of silence, "The Holy City lies where you stay, child. Explain to them, and they'll understand. This is also the order of the acting pope, which is to preserve ourselves and the spirit of the church. Do you understand?"

"Let those fugitives leave as they please and spread the news of the fall of the Holy City. By that time, the King of Graycastle will probably be anxious to take them in," thought Tucker.

"I understand, Your Eminence... No, Your Holiness," Farrina bit her lip. At length, she curled up her hands into a fist, placed it over her chest and bowed.

Just then, the somber sky was overspread by a haze of dusk. Tucker turned around and saw the orangey red rays of the setting sun slowly streak through clouds and that the fresh white snowfield was basking in slanting beams of sunshine.

"Does this mean... the Months of Demons has ended?" Farrina's face lighted up.

"Yes. The snow will melt in no time. Go and tell the news. If they start to prepare now, we'll be able to take off in two or three weeks."

"OK. Please excuse me!" She nodded and ran to the inner city.

At that moment, the bell in the Holy City tolled, announcing the

arrival of eventide. The bell tolled nine times to tell believers that it was time to close their eyes and pray to God.

Yet Tucker Thor did not pray.

Because God was not listening to them anymore.

He took off the crown on his head and placed it on the parapet. Then he ascended the city wall and gazed at the last splendor of the setting sun.

He had one more thing to do to persuade people to completely abandon Hermes.

But Tucker did not mind it because by doing so, he would be able to reunite with his old battle companions who had once fought with him.

It was not only a twilight for the church, but also for the whole human race.

Tucker shut his eyes and stooped over.

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Farrina heard a gentle thud behind her as if something had slipped down the wall and into the valley.

When she turned around, however, there was nobody on the city wall.

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The End of the Volume: The Bell of Twilight

Chapter 826: Conference of Agriculture Mobilization Movement

The Months of Demons this year lasted for nearly five months. By the time murky clouds that overhung the Western Region were dispersed by warm sunbeams, it was late spring.

Roland faced a pressing issue.

It was spring plowing.

Although the war against the Southernmost Region during the Months of Demons, when the other powers were all sort of in a state of dormancy, had won him a lot of time to prelude the unification operation, it was also undeniable that he had consumed tons of food in winter.

Due to the lack of food input and the rapid increase in the population, the food in the granary in the Border Area was, for the first time, exhausted. Roland was secretly happy that he had entrusted the seeds of Golden Ones developed by Leaf to Petrov and had ordered him to promote engineered food to the public right after the seizure of Longsong Stronghold; otherwise, they would not have peacefully made their way through the Months of Demons this year.

The concrete boats traveling between the border and the Longsong area was the lifeline of the First Army, for they transported pancakes made from coarse-grained wheat flour to soldiers fighting at the front.

As a result of the urgency of the matter, Roland convened a spring plowing conference right after the celebration of "Victory Day".

On that day, not only the Ministry of Agriculture but the whole City Hall, including secondary officials in the Longsong area, the district governor, Petrov, and the governor of Fallen Dragon Ridge,

Spear, were all summoned to the Neverwinter castle. It should be noted that Spear Passi was directly transferred by Maggie. Ghastly pale and frightened, she complained about her rough flight when she landed and bowed to Roland.

Calvin Kant, the lord of the Northern Region, was absent, but he sent his daughter Edith and his second son Cole to attend the conference on behalf of him. Roland was not sure if it was an illusion, but he noticed, somehow, that the Pearl of the Northern Region had become more radiant since her return from the Great Snow Mountain. Compared with her resplendency, Cole seemed increasingly frail and insignificant. Roland also wondered whether his attire was a little too... androgynous?

Anyhow, the attendees of the conference came from all parts of Graycastle, except the Eastern Region, whose lord had yet to pledge fealty to Roland, and the Central Region, where Roland had yet to establish a well-functioning city hall. Without these two regions, the conference could be considered as the first National Congress.

Roland surveyed the hall in satisfaction and then tapped the desk.

Everybody instantly became silent. All the eyes rested upon the king.

"You must be wondering why I wrote the word 'operation' on the banner." Roland pointed to the red banner on the wall behind him. "Because this is essentially a war. It determines whether we can successfully implement our strategic plan this year and whether we're doing the right thing for people in Neverwinter! I promised to refugees when I took them in that as long as they worked hard, they would never starve."

"In the past three years, I fulfilled my promise. My domain expanded from a small, underdeveloped border town to more than half of the territory of Graycastle. I see no reason that we can't

make it happen this year. Our kingdom would only be stable when our subjects aren't worried about food. Therefore, I need every one of you to take spring plowing seriously. All of you have to reach your agricultural production target this year in accordance with the plowing regulations and guidelines drafted by the Ministry of Agriculture." Roland paused for a second and then continued, "Also, starting from this year, there'll be an assessment specifically targeting the agricultural progress in your jurisdiction, which will include evaluations on how much virgin land you've cultivated, the number of farmers in your domain, as well as the agricultural production. These factors will be incorporated into the criteria for a competent governor!"

Perceiving the confusion among all the attendees, Roland smiled faintly. "It's OK you don't know about these evaluation items, because Sirius, the Minister of Agriculture, will later spend one day explaining to you in detail. In conclusion, if you fail to meet my criteria, it tells me that you aren't competent to rule the region and are no longer suitable for the governor position."

Nobody uttered a word, but Roland could clearly sense the tension among them from their expressions.

This was exactly the effect Roland wanted to achieve. The abolition of the feudal system not only meant the cancellation of feudal rights but also meant the abolishment of the hereditary system. Roland allowed those officials to receive benefits from the government, but he would not tolerate any delays of his development plan.

The agriculture assessment was simply a start.

Roland uncovered the curtain behind him, revealing the big red number underneath, and said, "I'll set an easy target for you for the first year in terms of other criteria. But in terms of agricultural production, I want you to reach this number!"

Everyone gasped. "2,500,000 kg?"

Roland was not surprised at their reaction. The average production in this era was 500,000 kg for a mid-sized city and 750,000 for a big one like the old king's city. The first time they had grown Golden Ones in Border Town, the food production was a little over 350,000 kg, which had been considered as an unprecedented big harvest at that time.

Of course, the actual food production was largely influenced by farmland areas and the number of farmers. Unlike Border Town which relied heavily on high-return crops, big cities totally depended on the surrounding villages and small towns, as well as the work of thousands of farmers to obtain such a big quantity of food. Because of this, he decided to include farmland areas and the number of farmers in the evaluation.

The fewer farmers were, the more workers would be in the factory.

Roland signaled everybody to be quiet. "In fact, when you see the testing field for Golden Twos, you'll understand this target isn't that unrealistic. After numerous repeated tests by Leaf, Golden Twos can now yield food more than two times Gold Ones per unit. The wheat-straw in the field is overloaded by ears of wheat."

Petrov exclaimed in surprise. "Your Majesty... is it true that Golden Twos can yield two times more?"

Among all the officials outside Neverwinter, Petrov was the only one who was impressed by the amazing production rate of Golden Ones. During the war in the Months of Demons, the Longsong Area had provided the First Army with over half of the total supplies, thanks to the cultivation of Golden Ones that had generated a huge amount of excess. In comparison, the normal wheat they had previously grown could not even suffice to feed people in one city.

"That's right, but Golden Twos isn't perfect either." Roland looked at Leaf standing next to him and announced, "Now I'll hand over to Miss Leaf from the Witch Union, who will talk about the

features of Golden Twos in detail."

After a slight nod, Leaf walked up to him with a bag of grown wheat in her hand and showed it to everybody. She said, "Golden Twos is different from any wheat you've grown before. It can only be grown once. So, you have to come to Neverwinter annually to get new seeds. I've strengthened the root of the plant so that it can absorb nutrition from the soil deep down the earth. That's also the reason it requires a lot of fertilizer; otherwise, we'll have to adopt a fallow system by marking out three farmlands and using them in a rotation. Also..."

Roland stroked his chin in satisfaction while watching Leaf become more confident and comfortable to speak in public. Golden Twos could be viewed as a new type of wheat that produced its own "Jinkela". Its roots could extend four to five meters underground and absorb nutrients more efficiently. Apart from being unable to reproduce, it surpassed Golden Ones in every aspect.

This sole defect of Golden Twos was actually a merit for Neverwinter. As the plant could not reproduce, the other cities would have to rely on the new king's city's supply once they started to grow Golden Twos. At the same time, other low-yield wheat would be obsolete and pushed out of the market. In a sense, Golden Twos enabled Roland to create a food monopoly, and the government would definitely benefit a lot from the control of the food resources.

Roland believed no farmers would want to grow normal wheat again after they tried out Golden Twos.

The promotion of the newly-developed seeds throughout the whole nation would largely alleviate the problem of food deficiency.

With more food... he could feed more people.

Because now, he no longer contented himself with ruling

Graycastle only.

Chapter 827: War Supplies

Edith was the first to raise questions after Leaf finished. "Your Majesty, is it safe for us ordinary people to consume the magic-engineered wheat?"

It was probably the problem that the people here were most concerned about. After the Pearl of the Northern Region brought that up, not only Petrov but also Spear was anxious to get a straight answer.

Roland replied with a smile, "First of all, there's no significant difference between Golden Twos and Golden Ones, for both of them are developed by Leaf. The only difference is that Golden Twos yields more food than Golden Ones. Second, although it's enhanced by magic power, the plant itself doesn't contain any, so you don't need to worry that it will cause harm to ordinary people. In fact, the oatmeal and the pancake I ate a few days ago were actually made from Golden Twos in the testing field."

Roland somehow remembered the fervent discussion about natural food, hybrid food, and genetically engineered food in the modern world. Some people stressed that the best food was natural food, but they had forgotten what natural food had originally looked like.

The origin of Golden Twos was very complicated. To fully explain it, Roland had to educate them on genetic mutation and the mechanism of heredity, a part of knowledge that even Leaf did not know much about. Although Leaf's ability could induce great changes to plants in a short period of time, she had to constantly supply the plants with magic power to sustain the change, and the change could not pass down to next generations. If the change was too great, the plants would die instantly when the supply of magic power suspended.

Therefore, when Leaf cultivated golden wheat, she used her

ability mainly to create genetic mutations and accelerate the growing speed of the plants. Then, she picked out those fit for survival and eliminate those not. After numerous rounds of selection and reproduction, she finally cultivated a species with a distinctive character. The process was no different than traditional farming, except it was a lot faster. The selection process, which usually would take hundreds of years, had completed in merely two years.

Roland had once seen what an original watermelon looked like. It was a fist-sized fruit wrapped in a hard shell with several pieces of yellow flesh in it, pretty much like a mandarin. By the 17th Century, however, the flesh had turned to a red color and the fruit itself had also become much larger. Unfortunately, over half of the fruit was filled with white tissues, with only four or five spoons of eatable flesh.

Apart from watermelon, many fruits people often saw nowadays looked quite different from what they had looked like in the past. In fact, the same held true for plants and animals. The most typical example was dogs, an originally non-existent species that had transformed from wolves as a result of generations of human influences.

Therefore, the so-called natural food was also a product of repeated human selection and filtering. The true, original food was most likely tasteless.

Plus, not only human beings but also other species, from mammals all the way to microorganisms, were all constantly changing to adapt better to the environment. In Roland's opinion, it was as natural for human beings to build a power station as yeasts ferment bread, because life itself was a part of nature.

Roland knew these theories were beyond the understandings of these local officials, so he simplified his answer to two sentences: a) It was safe to eat Golden Ones, and it was certainly OK to eat Golden Twos; b) I ate them as well. The best way to persuade them

in this era was that the king set an example for his people.

Seeing that everybody was now convinced, Roland went on, "Furthermore, like what we're doing in Neverwinter, all food trades in your city should be supervised and controlled by the secondary City Hall. Private food sale is forbidden. Barov, the Governor-in-Chief, will talk about the detailed implementation of the policy."

Countess Spear Passi raised her brows. "Your Majesty, if Golden Twos does provide high yields as you've described, there must be a large excess after all subjects are fed. That'll create a huge financial burden for the government if City Hall plans to buy back all the excess. The population in Fallen Dragon Ridge is just a little over 10,000. Considering that, do we also have to produce so much food?"

"Yes, because we aren't going to consume the excess of food but to stock them."

"Stock them?" Spear was a little surprised.

"For the upcoming Battle of Divine Will." Roland pronounced the words slowly.

Other than attracting immigrants to Graycastle, the other reason he forced local officials to promote Golden Twos was this battle that was going to determine the survival of all human beings. Since Roland was born in peacetime and had not experienced the cruelty of a prolonged war, he could only make war preparations based on what he had learned from histories.

The worst scenario Roland could think of was that the population reduced by 30% and that all young, abled ones went to war, leaving women and children working in the plant to provide supplies to the front. In that case, the farmland would be very likely deserted. If, however, they had food excess that could last two to three years, they might be able to survive the most difficult wartime and wait until things turned better.

Roland had discussed the matter with Karl Van Bate, the Minister of Construction. The latter believed that a granary that was well-designed, well-structured and well taken care of could preserve grains for at most five years. Although stale grains of one or two years old would not taste as good as fresh ones, nobody would give much thought of it when they were overwhelmed by the bitterness of a war.

It was worth noting that there were high-yield crops other than wheat in Leaf's testing field. After two years of experimenting, Leaf had successfully enhanced other imported crops, such as sugar canes, corns and potatoes, and cultivated their high-yield breeds. Corns and potatoes, in particular, genetically produced more food than wheat. The reasons Roland chose to promote Golden Twos rather than these two plants were: a) he could not easily create a monopoly on food trades as they could reproduce; b) their storage life was shorter than grains'.

Of course, agriculture was a very complex industry, which involved food for both human beings and animals... For example, poultry relied heavily on fodder beans. However, Roland had no time to carefully plan that part out at the moment, as the food problem in wartime was already a project big enough for him to worry about.

Since most of the attendees knew what the Battle of Divine Will stood for, nobody raised questions on the policy pertaining to the survival of human beings again. At the end of the conference, Roland fastened his eyes onto Scroll and said, "I hope that we add agriculture to our secondary education as a subject so as to train people into experts who specialize in farming various plants and crops."

As the education level in other cities was incomparable to that in Neverwinter, Roland felt it hard to realize the democratization of education throughout the whole Graycastle. As such, he believed it was easier to dispatch some trained professionals from

Neverwinter to supervise the agricultural industry in other cities. The movement would set a precedent for the other industries, such as chemistry, architecture and medical science. He did not expect his subjects to conduct their own research or construct new theories, but simply to apply what they had learned to the mundane operation of the industry.

After the conference, Wendy brought Roland a piece of news.

The witches who were exploring the snow mountain of the Western Region had safely docked at Neverwinter.

When Roland arrived at the wharf, someone dashed to him and threw herself into his arms.

Her blond hair tickled his cheeks. The air was impregnated with the scent that Roland was so familiar with.

"I'm back," Chuckling, Nightingale whispered in his ear.

Chapter 828: Nightingale's Secret Plan

Roland was too overwhelmed by the swell of emotions to develop an immediate response. He wanted to reproach her for risking her own life, but his words, which were about to come out, finally yielded to a look of resignation when he saw Nightingale's beaming smile.

In the end, he patted her on the back and said, "Be more careful next time."

Nightingale nodded and then shook her head. She whispered to him in a voice that nobody but he could hear, "Unlike Anna, I can't convert those drawings to physical entities... This is the only thing that I can do for you." She then paused for a moment and went on, "But please don't worry. My top priority is to protect you... and stand by your side. I won't recklessly put myself in a dangerous situation."

Nightingale flushed at her own bluntness. Although her voice kind of trailed off in the middle, Roland still clearly heard the word "you".

The act had probably consumed all Nightingale's valor. With these words, she disengaged herself and vanished in the Mist.

It was hard to imagine that the girl, who had to obviously muster all her courage to proclaim her feeling, would actually challenge a fearsome monster to a duel in the ruin, with nothing but a flintlock and some explosives in her hand.

Roland was deeply moved.

"Please let me continue to protect you in the future."

Hearing Nightingale's calming voice from behind, Roland somehow felt a sense of security which he had not experienced for a long time.

Next, as a common practice, he gave all the other witches a

welcoming hug.

Nonetheless, Roland was a little discomforted by the look of the Taquila survivors.

Unlike the laughing and cheering union members, the Taquila witches, following their leaders, landed in an orderly manner, each with a black box on the shoulder. When they passed Roland, however, they stared at Roland, eyes fastened onto him, full of ardent desires and a feverish aspiration that made Roland shudder uncontrollably.

Roland knew very well the reason behind their lusty gazes. Apparently, Pasha and some of the other witches had informed the God's Punishment Witches at the snow mountain of the Dream World. Apart from exploring, the purpose of their expedition was to transport the soul device to the Great Snow Mountain and transfer their souls to the devouring worms.

Roland did not mind wild gazes from women, but the problem was that most of the God's Punishment Witches had a male appearance. Roland understood that due to the limitation in the choices of shells, they were forced to pick male God's Punishment Warriors. However, for Roland, it was a very unnerving feeling to be stared by a person of the same sex.

Even though he knew the souls beneath these shells were female, he could not help feeling a little queasy under the scrutiny of a group of big, strong "male" warriors. It was even worse when the stares were overflowed with some ineffable eagerness.

After the greetings, Roland returned to the castle and found Nightingale had reappeared at his desk, her slender legs dangling in the air.

"So it's true... that those shells can enter the Dream World?"

It seemed some union witches had also learned the news.

Roland shrugged. "I was surprised at first as well. They will

intrude the dream if they disconnect themselves in the area covered by the beams of light. Those beams are more a transportation channel than a connection with the deities."

Nightingale pursed her lips without uttering a word. Her eyes, however, brightened as she listened. She even cocked her feet to Roland's knees. Evidently, she was much bolder when they were alone.

"No!" Roland immediately objected. "I know what you're thinking. You want to convert yourself to a God's Punishment Witch and enter the dream. I won't allow you to do that."

Roland had learned long before that Nightingale, unlike Anna, was more audacious. So he instantly renounced her crazy idea after noticing what she was planning on. If he did not, Nightingale would probably really plunge into action.

"But I..."

"There's no room for negotiation," Roland interrupted her decisively. "Entering the dream world doesn't mean you're fused with my mind, nor does it mean that you'll become immortal. It's just a fake, strange world which has been eroded by some unknown power. Perhaps someday it'll just vanish. Plus, even if you enter my dream on a daily basis, that's just one night. What about all those other moments? Are you planning to live in a shell that doesn't feel forever?"

Nightingale lowered her head. After a long silence, she muttered, "I just feel it's too unfair that they can go to places you once visited."

Roland was amused by her brooding tone. "It's an unimaginable price they've paid for. A senseless life of eternity is more terrible than a life of imprisonment. The Dream World is simply a small comfort to them. There's no need to envy them. You said 'My top priority is to protect you and... stand by your side'. Are you planning to break your promise?" Roland mimicked her voice. "I

don't want a bearded God's Punishment Warrior to stick around all day."

Abashed, Nightingale turned her head immediately. "I, I got it! I didn't say that I would live in a shell. You did though."

Roland smiled. "Would you like some Chaos Drink?"

She instantly turned back. "Yes!"

"Well, she's really easy to please," thought Roland.

Roland produced a pack of delicious dried fish from the drawer and put it on the desk, after which, he uncorked a new drink coming in a sky-blue bottle and filled Nightingale's glass. Roland said, "Thank you for your help. Agatha told me if you did not severely wound that monster, everybody would have been in danger."

Nightingale gulped down the drink and exhaled a long breath. She nibbled one piece of dried fish and rubbed her nose. "Anytime. You're being over-polite."

Roland shook his head. "No, I'm not. If all the members of the exploration team of the Witch Union are killed in this operation, it'll be a permanent loss for Neverwinter. Therefore, your job is equally important as Anna's. You just specialize in different things. Do you understand?"

Hearing this, Nightingale could not help smiling. She soon continued to chew her dried fish as if to cover her joy and the intricacies of her little mind. "Um... right, you said the Dream World has been eroded by an unknown power. What does that mean? Will you be in danger?"

Roland was amused by the stiff manner in which she switched her subject, yet he did not point out but simply replied, "That's a long story, but one thing is for sure, which is whatever that world becomes in the end, it won't affect the real me. No beams of light will appear if I don't want to dream."

As to the unknown power, Garcia said the Martialist Association would eventually lead their new recruits to uncover the mysterious veil of the dream world. No matter what she referred to, Roland would only know what she was talking about after seeing it.

Compared with the erosion, Roland cared more about the newly amended Mathematical Olympiad textbook.

Chapter 829: Findings at the Snow Mountain

The Mathematical Olympiad textbook itself did not bear much significance, but the premonition attaching to it did. During the initial exploration of the Dreamland, Roland had discovered that the books that he had never read were all blank, and this theory applied to both the books on bookstands and those in the library. Most books were nothing but blank sheets topped with a cover. He even speculated that those book covers were productions of some thin threads of his memories fading into oblivion. If he had never seen a book, it would never exist in the dream world.

But the Mathematical Olympiad textbook on Zero's desk debunked his theory.

He wondered why he had not noticed the peculiarity at the beginning. Had he overlooked it during the exploration in the first two or three months, or it was actually a change that occurred later?

If it was the latter, he had to probe into it.

If the Mathematical Olympiad textbook could come out of thin air and gradually restore its original appearance, would other books do the same trick? What about things he had never beheld?

Roland tried to figure out the connection between the three events, which were the strange power he had obtained, the extermination of Fallen Evils, and the release of the Force of Nature. He was eager to find out if they were the driven factors of the changes to this world.

"Your Majesty?"

Nightingale's voice interrupted his train of thoughts.

Roland looked down and found that he was stroking Nightingale's feet with his hands without noticing it. The thin

fabrics of socks did not prevent him from touching Nightingale's smooth skin and dainty toes.

Nightingale looked a little embarrassed. "I changed my socks, but since I couldn't take a shower on the ship, I'm probably still a bit dirty... Would you mind if I taking a shower first?"

Roland was abashed. He did not know why he did that when his mind was apparently on some serious matters.

Plus, the equivocal remark "take a shower first" seemed to contain some unintended meanings, but his action was absolutely unintentional!

While he was rummaging for an appropriate answer, the knocking on the office door greatly alleviated his trouble. After Nightingale vanished in the Mist, Roland cleared his throat and said, "Come in."

Agatha came into the office. After an unceremonious bow, she asked, "All the samples from the Great Snow Mountain have been transferred to the Third Border City. Do you want to take a look?"

Roland managed to calm himself down in the guise of contemplation. He then gave an approving nod. "Of course, let's go now."

Agatha replied a "yes", but she soon turned around at the door and asked, "Are you not feeling well?"

"Why did you say that?" Roland was a little surprised.

Agatha answered in a serious tone, "Your voice sounds a little weird, which is a typical symptom of a cold. Although the Months of Demons has passed, it's still the coldest time of the year when snows melt, and people are most vulnerable to diseases at this time around. You aren't a witch, so you should take care of yourself, not only for you but for the whole human race. Do you understand? Before we take off, I suggest sending for Lily and asking her to check on you."

...

The physical examination did not take long, but Roland drank a bottle of "anti-illness water" made by Lily in great amusement. Under the protection of both his guards and the witches, Roland descended to the bottom of the Impassable Mountain Range.

He was a little relieved when he saw the Taquila survivors.

Since all of them were frequent visitors of the Dreamland who had experienced the pleasure of the Dream World except Pasha and Alethea, they looked more approachable. The visitors included Phyllis a.k.a. "No. 76", Faldi a.k.a. "Magic Bug Nest", Dawnen a.k.a. "Matte Curtains", and Ling a.k.a. "Shadow Walker". Among them, Phyllis was the only one who had a female appearance.

Alethea ventured, "I've heard that you plan to raise those unknown bugs in our hall and tame them? Mortal king, I have to say you're as bold and crazy as those researchers in the Quest Society. You know one day, your curiosity will eventually destroy you. Those are species left by enemies from the deep ocean!"

Roland shrugged carelessly. "That's why I want you to guard them. The captured bugs aren't aggressive. They can't even drill holes. One secret chamber would be enough to confine them. Plus, according to Agatha's observation, these bugs don't have self-consciousness but the instinct of feeding and reproduction. There's a chance that the multi-eyed monster regains its control over them. However, if Neverwinter is so defenseless that even a creature as stupid as that can approach our city wall, we would probably have been wiped out long before."

"Isn't Agatha also a member of the Quest Society?" Alethea swayed her tentacle disapprovingly. As she had also been a higher ascendant before her conversion, she did not pay as much respect to the Ice Witch as Phyllis did.

Agatha, who happened to become the subject of their conversation, simply twitched her lips, apparently having no

intention to involve herself in this altercation.

"If you really want to make a fuss about it, Celine is also a member of the Quest Society. If she hears you say this nonsense, she'll certainly go against you." Pasha came forward and apologized to Roland, "Alethea meant no offence. She's just worried that those mutated bugs will have negative impacts on Neverwinter."

Roland waved his hands. "That's fine. Let's go take a look."

He knew that Alethea's fear was not baseless, but what Agatha and Lightning wrote in their reports carried a significant meaning. If he exterminated the bugs because of some potential risks, it would be like throwing out a child along with the bath water. Placing them at the bottom of the mountains was already a safety measure.

"OK. Please follow me." Pasha nodded.

...

Across the spacious hall and a narrow corridor, they found themselves in an empty room almost as big as four or five castles. In the light of several Stones of Lighting in the wall, they detected the obscure outline of the room. Littered with loose soil, the ground underneath appeared to be excavated thoroughly. On the other side of the room, they could hear interminable patters of running water.

Pasha introduced the room to the visitors, "This is a culture room newly set up by Fran. It's absolutely safe in here, for there's only one exit and the underground water was the seepage from the rocks. Are you... really planning to grow mushrooms and mutated bugs in here though?"

Agatha further explained, "Because those huge mushrooms were exactly what the bugs feed on. If they can grow in here like they normally do in the natural environment, we can obtain a large number of mutated bugs effortlessly.

If they could not transplant the mushrooms, they would have to resort to Lily's artificial cultivation method. Roland thought It was a pity that the mushrooms down the ruin at the snow mountain were not edible because of their poisonous nature, for from their size and quantity, they were definitely high protein food that could serve as a meat substitute.

"What are those bugs for?" Phyllis asked out of curiosity. "If you want to study them, just grow a few and that should do."

Roland eyed Agatha and answered, "They'll probably play a big role in the development of Neverwinter if the report is correct."

Agatha responded with a nod. She picked a strange bug crawling on the mushroom and dropped it to the ground. Then, she nailed the bug with two ice pitons in its joints on its head and around its waist.

The bug soon became motionless after a fierce struggle.

Chapter 830: The Function of the Mutated Bug

As what the Ice Witch had written in her report, the bug, which resembled a hairless spider or an ant with a big belly, had a slim upper body with projected joints and a prodigious lower body almost as big as a grown man's torso.

It was evident that this was not the largest size the bug could grow up to, for, to stuff a Mad Demon into its abdomen required its belly to swell out to be at least two or three times its normal size. Based on the "photographs" taken at the scene, when the bug had a Mad Demon inside its body, it would tuck its head into the ground, leaving its swollen belly up in the air. Therefore, it looked like a huge, fully-grown egg at the first glance.

"Did you kill it?" Phyllis asked.

"That'll save us some trouble. It wasn't aggressive, but it ran pretty fast." With these words, Agatha thrust the long sword made of ice into the bug's belly.

Some stinky, milky-white liquid instantly gushed out.

Agatha said, "The slime can be used as a preservative. It's fluid under normal conditions, but it'll slowly solidify and turn into something like egg white as time goes by."

"And... are we going to eat it?" Faldi frowned.

Agatha shook her head. "I haven't eaten it, but I guess it won't be very tasty. The key lies in another liquid in its body."

This time, after spending seven or eight minutes flaying the bug's back, Agatha took out a slimy green organ.

"It looks like a gallbladder." Phyllis poked out her head in excitement.

"But it isn't gall in here." Agatha carefully cut it open and added

two drops of dark green liquid to the slimes on the ground, after which, she produced two ice pitons and quickly mixed the two liquids together. "What comes next is the key."

Roland held his breath, watching the "preservative solution" slowly change.

Before long, the liquid gradually thickened and the Ice Witch's movement slowed down. In about two or three minutes, the ice pitons were stuck in the slimes as if it was glued to something.

Roland stuck out his fingers and pressed the liquid surface, only to find that the slimes had turned into a gel-like substance. Although it felt soft, he could only make a dent of several millimeters in it.

Phyllis exclaimed in surprise, "This is..."

"Biological rubber," Roland answered excitedly. "This is what made Fran get stuck in there."

Roland had noticed in Agatha's first report the peculiar feature of the bugs down the ruin. He had thought it was similar to spiders' cobwebs, but after he had read subsequent reports, he had found the solidified slimes were as flexible and tough as rubber. It could not only cling to the surface of an object but could be also molded into various shapes. These two properties made it highly practical.

Indeed, Roland had been asking people to look for rubber plants. He believed once he found a sample, Leaf could enhance it and subsequently turn it into high-yield crops that could grow on a mass scale. Unfortunately, his search for either rubber trees or rubber grass was fruitless. Nobody, not even people from the Kingdom of Dawn, which was famous for its diverse species, had heard of such plants. As a result, he had to rely on Soraya's ability to produce elastic materials.

The lack of natural elastic materials greatly limited the productivity of Neverwinter.

With more new machine tools being invested in production and a substantial increase in the plant's productivity and processing level, the deficiency in rubbers had become a prominent problem. Roland knew very well that rubber, which could be both natural and artificial, was simply a generalized term for all elastic materials. Nevertheless, he had no knowledge of specific rubber production procedures.

While Roland was suspecting that there were probably no rubber plants in this world, the reports on the exploration of the ruin at the snow mountain came to him as a pleasant surprise.

That was why he decided to cultivate these mutated creatures brought by monsters in the deep ocean despite potential risks.

Now that he had seen the bug in person, he knew that he had made the right decision.

Roland did not care much about the lasting power of the solidified slimes. As long as the material could seal and fasten moving parts, it could veritably be classified as rubber.

Agatha said slowly, "After reviewing the scene reconstructed by Summer, we found it was exactly those bugs that made Fran glued to the hole. They tied her tight with a net of slimes that streamed from their tails. However, the liquid in their belly alone won't solidify. Only when it's mixed with the liquid in the organ at the back will it become sticky and gooey. If Sylvie didn't find Fran with the Eye of Magic, we would have looked for her for another 10 to 15 days."

Pasha nodded. "I see. This is a really good material for making fishing nets and ropes."

Alethea retorted flatly, "Maybe good for fishing nets but not for ropes. It's too soft and stretchy. Nobody will like a rope that stretches infinitely. Plus, I don't think our learned mortal king would bring these unknown bugs to Neverwinter just to have some more salted fish." She paused for a second and then turned to

Roland. "No matter what crazy research you want to conduct, don't forget that now you're representing parties other than Graycastle."

Her comment stunned Roland for a second. Roland had never expected that Alethea, who had been brooding on him being the sole leader of the united front, would understand his research intention, and certainly had never expected her to say something that, in a sense, acknowledged his leadership.

At this thought, Roland managed a smile. "Of course. If everything goes well, you'll soon see its wide variety of uses in the near future."

Pasha asked, "By the way, how do we make the bugs eject slimes without the monster that controlled them? We can't kill them every time, can we?"

Agatha put the organ into a leather bag and wiped her hands. "This is what we're going to research later. If nothing else works, we'll have to grow them on a mass scale."

Apart from the "rubber worm", Roland also checked some other new species taken from the ruin, such as the fruit plant that emanated a ghostly glow and a type of boneless transparent fish which lived in the underground river, but they were nothing next to the mutated bugs.

The glow of the fruit plant, which could not be used for street illumination, was simply an offspring of symbiosis, where a large number of glowing beetles nested in the fruit. Once the flesh was gone, those beetles would disperse while spreading out the seeds. The fish could hardly survive in the daylight, but could only live in an underground river. Although it was tasty, Roland did not think they could farm them on a large scale. They could only serve as a luxury for a few.

Having said that, Roland certainly did not expect that every new species would surprise him like the "rubber worm". He was content

with the findings in the exploration of the snow mountain.

Before leaving the Third Border City, Pasha brought him two God's Punishment Witches that Roland had never met.

"Your Majesty, they volunteer to transfer their souls to become new devouring worms. But before that, could you take them to the Dreamland to let them experience the wonders of that incredible world once?"

Chapter 831: A Decision with No Regrets

Two days later, a strange-looking concrete boat slowly departed the dock of Neverwinter.

There was a huge swell, which looked like a moving hill, on the deck of the boat. It was completely covered with burlap cloth and guarded by fully-armed soldiers standing erect on either side of the boat, and a dozen God's Punishment Witches.

The boat was the "Victory". It was en route to transfer the soul device to the Great Snow Mountain where the Taquila witches would complete their incarnation ceremony and be integrated into the worm carriers.

Out of the confidentiality reason, the witches did not bid farewell. No whistle was blown as the boat took off, and even the loading job had been completed the night before without being noticed by anyone.

Roland stood at the sodden dock built with bricks and slabs, watching the shadow of the boat gradually fade away. He knew once the conversion was completed, there would be three worm carriers in Neverwinter, which would provide great help for both municipal construction and the defensive line project. However, Roland somehow did not rejoice over the progress as much as he had anticipated.

The two volunteering witches were called Jasmine and Lyra. From their original appearances in the Dream World, the pair looked just a little over 20 years old, almost the same age as Tilly. They both have outgoing personalities.

In order to let them have a good time, Roland had taken the two girls, Phyllis and the other witches to the amusement park in the suburb, where they had hopped on a Ferris wheel, ridden a roller coaster, experienced the haunted house (during which Jasmine had accidentally broken a ghost's head dropping down suddenly)

and taken a spinning pendulum ride. He had also allowed them to eat as much as they had wanted. Had Roland not earned some money by killing a few Fallen Evils a few days past, he probably would not have been able to afford such a revelry.

Jasmine and Lyra, in the past two days, had been in a total shock, but they had followed Roland submissively without raising a single question. They had screamed as everybody had when the roller coaster had inverted and had laughed like any girls next door when they had had strawberry sundaes. All in all, they looked no different than ordinary people.

If he had not known it beforehand, he would have never believed that these two girls had made a decision to sacrifice their human bodies and devote themselves to the battle against demons, just like the decision they had made 400 years ago at the bottom of the ruin in front of the magic core.

When the dream had ended, they had looked more serene than Roland had expected.

Roland had wanted to console the two girls, but words had caught in his throat. There was no point to dissuade them from converting to devouring worms, for it was an action neither in his interests nor in the interests of the united front. Words, in this case, had all become frivolous and more sounded like feigned kindness.

In the end, Roland had become the one who had been offered solace.

He still clearly remembered their words and the expressions on their faces back then.

"Thank you," Jasmine had said with a smile, "and..."

"We don't regret it." Lyra had finished the latter half of the sentence.

At that moment, Roland could hear the throbs of their hearts.

They liked everything here.

But they did not regret making that decision.

"Your Majesty?" Phyllis, who came to send off her companions as well, looked at Roland. "Aren't you... going back to the castle?"

The words pulled Roland back to the reality. By the time he realized it, the "Victory" had disappeared from his sight, leaving a haze of fogs behind it.

Roland put the thoughts out of his head. He took a deep breath and asked, "They really can't disconnect themselves after being integrated into the carriers?"

As if to know what he wanted to convey, Phyllis lowered her voice. "A God's Punishment Witch is different from a carrier. The former retain some basic consciousness even without a soul transfer. Our conversion to a God's Punishment Witch was more like giving commands than a fusion. But carriers are different. They're specific vessels that seal the soul permanently once the integration is completed, although those vessels will become dormant if not used for a long time. Nobody has ever managed to get out of one up to this date, at least none of the witches, not even Pasha, is able to do that."

"But there're beams of light above the carriers, right?"

"That's right." Phyllis nodded. "Without magic power, those cumbersome bodies can't move independently."

"Perhaps one day, we can also find a way to have their souls return to the Dream World," Roland looked up at the distant, azure sky and said slowly.

After a moment of silence, Phyllis turned her eyes in the same direction. "Well... perhaps one day."

...

To Lorgar, the jungles covered with snows in the Western Region

were something completely new.

For more than once, she had heard from traveling tradesmen what snow looked like and envisioned them as some cold, white sand. When she saw it in person, however, she found snow was way finer and whiter than her imagination, even finer and whiter than the purest river sand in Silver Stream.

The whole world was wrapped in a different color.

According to Ashes, although the Months of Demons had passed, it would take at least half a month for the snow to melt completely.

Lorgar thought that was exactly what she wanted, for, in that case, she could see a pure white snow city.

There was little she could occupy herself with during the voyage. Lorgar had turned the steel ship inside out but still could not find its source of power. Even Andrea failed to give her a definite answer. She only said evasively that a machine that continuously boiled water was pushing the boat forward. As to its detailed mechanism, Lorgar was informed that only King Roland and Miss Anna knew about it.

Lorgar did not know much about King Roland, but she had heard from Ashes that Miss Anna had a place on the "Battle Strength Ranking of Neverwinter".

Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan thus became more impressed with and also more interested in powerful and intelligent Anna.

When she mentioned the ranking to Andrea, the latter, however, dismissed it with a scornful smile.

"A battle strength ranking?" Andrea cast a sharp, sideways glance. "A man is different from a wolf. No individual can compete with a group of people. Isn't it animal to only make an emphasis on individual fighting capacity?"

"Wolves are also social animals," Lorgar corrected her.

"Well, fine. Then just take another animal as an example, like tigers and snow leopards." Andrea coughed. "Anyway, Anna is the power source of Neverwinter. It was Anna's ability that enabled the First Army to quash the watchdog and Iron Whip clan with one blow. I bet Ashes didn't tell you that she was almost beaten by an ordinary man."

As Andrea had expected, the wolf girl was taken by surprise. Andrea went on, "That ordinary man used the exact weapon made by Anna. There's no point to discuss fighting capacities without talking about those weapons. If you want to become stronger, I suggest that you ask His Majesty to grant you a set of professional weapons." At these words, Andrea patted the long-barrelled gun on her back and said, "If you can carry these big tubes on your back after your transformation, that would be more useful than any combatting skills."

Lorgar did not really agree with Andrea, but she took a note of her advice.

Her father often told her to listen and observe, and also to always remember what she had wanted in the first place.

As they moved against the current and as the water suddenly rose, the iron ship slowed down drastically. On the fifth day after they had entered the Western Region. the wolf girl saw a beautiful, big, fat pigeon.

It hovered in the air for quite a while before darting straight toward Ashes at the bow.

When Lorgar thought she would have an extra meal for lunch, she noticed that Ashes, smiling, produced a bag of cooked solid food and fed the pigeon. The pigeon, on the other hand, nuzzled up to Ashes as if they were old friends who had not seen each other for ages. It was when the pigeon started to speak that Lorgar realized that it was actually a witch.

"Coo, coo coo!"

"I got it. Tell Princess Tilly that I'll be there soon."

"And me!" Andrea did not like being left behind.

"Coo!"

The pigeon gave a nod, spread out its wings and took off. It soon disappeared in the northwestern direction.

Lorgar asked, "She's..."

Ashes turned around. "Maggie. Like you, she's also a witch who can perform a full-body transformation."

"I see..." thought Lorgar, but she then suddenly remembered that Maggie should transform into a fierce, aggressive and frightful giant monster. She wondered why Maggie would turn into a pigeon.

While Princess Lorgar was still in a daze, Ashes patted her on the shoulder. "Time to pack up. We'll soon reach Neverwinter."

Chapter 832: An Encounter with the King

As the whistle blew in a low-pitched tone, Roland staggered to a stop at the dock. Lorgar noticed the passerby dock all came to a halt and raised their right hands, saluting the towering ship when she stepped onto the trestle. It was probably because the ship was named after the chief.

The soldiers from the First Army on the ship responded to the public with a salute in the same manner.

Lorgar gathered that should be a special form of greeting.

However, unlike any of the greetings she had witnessed, where there was usually a party more superior than the other, the greeting here did not stress such a status difference. The equality between initiators and receivers confused Lorgar. She did not understand why they had to greet each other with such a ceremonious air when they were equal. In her opinion, the whole point of formalities was to pay respects and submit to the receiver, no matter it was kneeling and worshipping, or placing a fist over one's heart.

Apart from that, she also noticed that even the children playing around the dock saluted in the same way, chest out and shoulders back. During the process, nobody looked reluctant or inferior. Instead, their eyes were all full of joy and energies. The salutation seemed to have built a connection between each other that words had failed.

Ashes broke the silence. "This is a military salutation. I didn't know why they did that at the beginning and thought it was an etiquette imposed by Roland Wimbledon to his subjects. Later I found it wasn't what I thought."

Lorgar raised her brow in surprise. "Does it have nothing to do with the Roland?"

"Correct. They'll salute voluntarily every time a boat carrying the First Army docks, because the return of the boat means their family members have come back home safe and sound from their expedition."

"But they don't look like... families," Princess Lorgar remarked hesitatively. If they were, the greetings should be more emotional. Plus, practically all the soldiers on board were male, but there were few females at the dock. Could every one of them happen to have a brother?

Andrea shrugged. "All the members of the First Army are from Neverwinter, which means most residents have a family member who has joined the army. There's also a lot of them from neighboring streets. The First Army is totally different from mercenaries who drift around looking for potential employers, nor do they work the same way as an enlisted militia. They take pride in their jobs. They celebrate the safe return of family members for each other. I believe this is probably what His Majesty refers to as the significance of a 'people's army'".

"So it's an army... built by all subjects?" Lorgar questioned herself in silence.

The wolf girl followed the witches into Neverwinter, still lost in thoughts.

What the new king's city of Graycastle first impressed her was its tidiness. Despite streaming pedestrians, both houses and streets in the city were aligned in straight rows, including roadside trees. The compact arrangement gave Lorgar a suffocating feeling. Although the city looked quite magnificent at the first glance, she did not feel as comfortable as in Iron Sand City.

Moreover, to her great disappointment, there was little snow in Neverwinter. Even the solid-surfaced road underneath was dry. She could only spy some remnant of snow at the tips of tree branches and on the roofs.

Her plan to visit a pure white snow city was frustrated.

Of course, there was still something appealing to her.

Lorgar was overwhelmed by the huge boards that overhung some of the houses on the street, on which various signs and logos were printed, such as Old Hunter Leather, Straw House, North Slope Gem House, etc., although some of the boards were blank.

In addition, she was surprised to find that there was a sign at every intersection, clearly showing where each branch head, as well as the name of each street.

For example, the street she was currently pounding was called Glow Boulevard.

The wolf girl soon found these signs very helpful to newcomers of Neverwinter. These street signs provided her with a basic structure of the city and told her where to shop and where to find a hotel, saving her trouble to seek local gangs or Rats for information.

During her conversations with tradesmen traveling between the Southernmost Region and the north, she had learned numerous entrepreneurial stories that stressed the arduous and laborious undertaking of establishing oneself in a foreign city. To expose your foreigner identity would immediately put you in a defenseless and disadvantageous position.

But the street signs, although trivial, greatly eased visitors' minds. She even felt a sense of embracement at the sight of these signs, as if the city were welcoming her.

Probably that was the reason the city appeared so vigorous and prosperous everywhere.

Lorgar, however, did not have much time appreciating this foreign city.

Because Ashes soon took her to the Lord's castle. After she waited in the hall for a while, a guard brought her a message from the

King of Graycastle. "Please follow me. His Majesty has agreed to receive you."

For some reason, Lorgar suddenly felt a little nervous.

She took a deep breath in secret and followed the guard to the third floor, after which she found herself in a bright, spacious study.

Behind the mahogany desk close to the French window sat a ridiculously young man. He was wearing a plain robe, bare-headed, whose gray hair cascaded over his shoulders, with no rings or diamonds on any of his fingers. He was fondling a quill and studying her with great interest.

This is the chief who utterly routed her clan and turned the whole Southernmost Region upside down?

For a moment, Lorgar could not connect him with the person she had previously pictured.

She thought a knowledgeable man who possessed a profound understanding of martial arts should be at least 40 years old. His forehead should be wrinkled, his beard braids should reach his chest, and he should have fathomless eyes of an old man. Even if northerners did not like the idea of braiding their beards, he should not be this young!

At this very moment, Lorgar realized that she had inquired about everything including powerful warriors in Neverwinter, but had forgotten to ask about what the chief looked like, one of the most important businesses.

After a moment of hesitation, Princess Lorgar decided to salute in accordance with Mojins' customs.

Shaking her ears, Lorgar went to knees and slowly lay down on her stomach. She had heard that gray hair was a typical facial trait of a Graycastle royal descendant.

"You're the Divine Lady from Wildflame clan, right?" The king

did not let her lie there for a long time. As soon as her forehead touched the floor, he broke the silence. "Please rise, sagacious wolf. Welcome to Neverwinter. I'm Roland Wimbledon, the King of Graycastle and also your chief."

Lorgar slightly frowned at the word "sagacious wolf". The addressing was simply queer. She had never heard people call a wolf sagacious before.

Yet she quickly got to her feet in an airy manner as if she had never heard Roland's words. "My name is Lorgar Burnflame. As to the title Divine Lady... I believe it was more appropriate to regard me as a witch here. Further, my father Guelz Burnflame sends his best regards on behalf of Wildflame clan, in hopes that your sovereign will be as long-lasting as the oasis."

This time, however, she did not hear a response at once.

Wondering, the wolf girl secretly raised her head, only to find that Roland's eyes were fixed on her long, droopy ears.

Chapter 833: An Unexpected Conversation

Lorgar's heart sank at Roland's unscrupulous gaze.

She knew what she looked like. Back in Iron Sand City, she had heard many people call her lycanthrope monster, half man or the Abandoned One secretly behind her back. Fearing these names would hurt the self-esteem of the third daughter of the chief, nobody had ever dared openly address her in that way.

But she was currently not in Iron Sand City and was no longer the princess shielded by the Wildflame clan, so she had to face these venomous comments on her own.

"Are your ears... and tail both real?" The chief hesitated for a long time before eventually blurting out. "Do you have to use magic power to maintain this shape, or they've become a part of your body?"

Lorgar bit her lip. Instead of answering the question, she pushed her hair back, revealing her one side of her face where her normal ear had disappeared. "I can't tuck them back, Your Majesty. I know they look very strange, but this is what I really look like. I don't want to hide my imperfection... If you insist, I'll try to avoid going to public places so that I won't scare people out."

Although Lorgar had resolved to embrace herself long before, she still had a mean opinion of herself on such an occasion when being directly questioned. Divine Ladies were viewed as powerful and beautiful beings by Mojins, who were favored by all the clans and admired by all young warriors, but she, unfortunately, was an exception.

She had been ignored after her awakening. Her legitimacy had been questioned even by her own clansmen, which was the reason her father had decided to name her as his heir. Lorgar dedicated herself to physical training and pretended that she did not care about those floating rumors, but sometimes, it was just hard to

remain indifferent when so many people pointed finger at her back.

She had certainly anticipated these scenarios, but since she had chosen her path, she would not easily cede to her fate no matter what difficulties were awaiting her. The endless sand road in her dream had pointed where she should go. At these thoughts, the wolf girl erected herself, trying to look audacious.

The chief smacked his lips. "Strange? Why did you say that?"

Lorgar, who was prepared to receive any vicious remarks, stunned for a second. "Huh? Isn't it because..."

"They don't look like human ears?" Roland shrugged. "Ordinary men don't have magic power either, and these two ears aren't affecting your hearing or mobility. So, how can you say they're defective? They're simply a unique feature of yours, a very interesting one indeed. Don't you think these two ears look pretty?"

"Ahem, Your Majesty, please mind your language." At that moment, Lorgar heard a woman's voice behind the chief. The voice was very low and soft, but she still captured it.

Yet she was, at that time, too absorbed in the chief's comment to think about anything else.

Pretty?

Lorgar had never associated herself with the word "pretty". For a second, she failed to come up with an answer, her cheeks burning, her brooding courage almost gone.

How is a half man pretty?

"Anyway, I don't require you to conceal your face or wear a hoody in public... You can do whatever you want." Roland went on, "Perhaps someone will point and stare at you at the beginning, but they'll get used to it eventually. One solution is to ask Soraya to draft a picture-story book about you, or you can join Star Flower

Troupe to star in a play and become an idol. This would be the fastest way for the public to get to know you."

Lorgar was overwhelmed by a series of unfamiliar words like "picture-story book", "Star Flower Troupe" and "idol". She stood rooted to the ground, failing to utter a word. Fortunately, Roland returned to their previous subject just in time.

"Right, Ashes told me that you came here to defend against demons?"

Relieved, the wolf girl answered, "And also to train myself, Your Majesty. I've heard there's a witch called Miss Nana in Neverwinter who can treat any wounds inflicted during a battle. This is very important to a warrior. You must know that it's a warrior's dream to fight and gain combatting experience without the fear of getting injured. Of course, I'll not only fight against your enemies but also bear all the medical expenses incurred."

Roland nodded. "I see. If you're willing to join the Witch Union, you'll have a big chance to fight..."

"But I prefer to act alone, Your Majesty." Lorgar interrupted him quietly. "Like a mercenary, I don't want to be distracted by anything other than fighting."

She knew that was just an excuse. The reason behind her lie was that she wanted to have a better understanding of northern kingdoms before pledging alliance to the chief. Lorgar had not forgotten that she was essentially a Sand Nation. If Roland failed to keep his promise made at Land of Fire, those Sand Nations moving to the south would eventually sever all relationships with Graycastle. If things really got to that point, the King of Graycastle would be her enemy. Hence, she could not make her decision without a thorough consideration.

"Really..." Roland reflected upon her words for a while and then spread out his hands regretfully. "Then I can't satisfy your demand."

"Why?" Lorgar was surprised. She thought a mercenary with exquisite combatting skills would be popular everywhere, not to mention that she was willing to provide her service for free and bear all medical expenses. No sensible people would ever decline such a generous offer. How could he refuse her?

"Because this is going to be a full-fledged war, not some minor disputes between several clans."

Lorgar felt all her blood rush to her head. She was outraged at Roland's insulting comment where he basically renounced all Sand Nations' fights as silly jokes. She perked up her tail and was about to shoot back when Roland suddenly switched the topic. "You've fought with Ashes, right? What do you think of her?"

Suppressing her anger, the wolf girl replied indignantly, "Very powerful. She would be a first-class warrior even in the Southernmost Region."

Roland said slowly, "This is the power of an Extraordinary. There're even Transcendents much stronger than them. The latter has gone beyond all physical restrictions of the human body and possess an inconceivable power. In other words, nothing can stop them from improving themselves."

"Tran... scendents?" Roland's words completely had Lorgar's attention. She wondered how powerful that person had to be when even Ashes admired her.

"However, even with three Transcendents, dozens of Extraordinaries, and thousands of combat witches, we failed to stop demons, and a great empire thus collapsed overnight. Now, it's our turn." The chief's every single word seemed to directly go to her heart. "The reason I declined your offer is very simple. This isn't a one-on-one duel but a fatal war between two civilizations. No matter how strong you are, individual operations won't work... More importantly, I don't want you to die for nothing."

Chapter 834: Let's Drink and Celebrate

...

Lorgar did not know how she had exited the castle. She watched people pass by in a great haste, leaving her standing in the middle of the street at a loss.

The encounter with the king was beyond her expectation in every aspect.

She had thought the chief would have held a hostile attitude toward her because of her abnormal half-human appearance. An unkind king would not hesitate to conceal his feeling, whereas a calculating one would normally remain expressionless. However, she was certain that his attitude would change once he was informed of the purpose of her visit, because a free warrior was highly demanded everywhere, not to mention that she agreed to help Neverwinter defy demons. Who would decline such as a generous offer?

Lorgar envisioned that she would then settle down in the castle area, living in a hotel in the inner city and be treated as a clan guest. During her stay, she would get acquainted with more witches, especially the ones with great combatting skills, and obviously including Miss Nana. Although not everyone would like to know her, she believed there must be someone like her, who would like to advance their fighting techniques through dueling. This practicing method would benefit both parties and was certainly more efficient than punching sandbags.

When she got everything ready, she would then go find demons to further challenge herself. Ashes told her that those enemies were all hiding in the uninhabited Barbarian Land in the northwest. Lorgar was not afraid of camping in the wild, nor did she care about the treachery of the enemies' hiding places, because wolves were the ruler of the wilderness. She believed her acute

sense of smell and excellent hearing would help her locate their lair.

But the truth was a total reverse of everything she had pictured.

It was Lorgar's first time to hear somebody praise her ears and call them pretty since her awakening. Even her father, who had never been averse to her appearance, had never appreciated her look. Often he said, "You'll definitely be one of the most stunning girls in Iron Sand City if you don't have that deformity."

Will wolf ears... really look good on her?

She had been so shocked by the unexpected comment that her head had been in the clouds during the latter half of the conversation. The chief had accepted her physical appearance but had refused her free service of fighting against demons. By the time she had left the castle, she had still not recovered from the blow.

"No, no, this is just a small defeat," Lorgar consoled herself. She patted her cheeks and took a deep breath. As long as she stuck to her path, nothing was impossible. Actually, when she thought it over, the rejection did not affect her initial plan very much. She could still explore the city, investigate demons and get to know other witches, except that it would take a little longer than she had anticipated. Although Roland had rejected her, he did not impose any restrictions on her and even hinted that she was welcome to the Witch Union anytime if she changed her mind. Since Lorgar had decided to act alone, this would probably work better for her plan.

At these thoughts, Lorgar pricked up her droopy ears, wagged her tail and clenched her fists. She thought to herself, "That's right! If demons are really that strong, why did the chief build his king's city here? If demons come from the northwest, the first human city they come across will be Neverwinter. Isn't it safer to stay as far away from such a danger as possible when there's no

guarantee that he can conquer demons?"

The words "I don't want you to die for nothing" were probably a feigned kindness to dissuade her from challenging demons individually. Nobody knew who would gain the eventual victory until he tried out! If she really got injured, the chief would definitely ask Miss Nana to cure her, because if he did not, he would then break his own words.

Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan cheered up again after thinking over the matter in her head.

She still had over 100 gold royals, more than enough to pay the hotel bills. Even if the medical expenses were insanely high, she did not think they would charge dozens of gold royals at a time. The money she currently owned would allow her to live here for several years without her worrying about expenses on food, drinks, clothing, herbs and desert guides. She firmly believed that without the support of the King of Graycastle, she would still be able to pick on demons by herself.

Lorgar felt greatly relieved after she had a plan. She looked around, starting to study the boards that hung above the surrounding premises. Since she had determined to take things slow, the first thing she should do was to find a place of abode.

As it was still bright and that she was not in a hurry, she decided to celebrate her safe arrival in the Western Region of Graycastle in accordance with the customs of Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan.

A tavern thus became her first stop.

No sooner had Lorgar set out than a pretty board caught her attention.

On the wooden board was a lifelike drawing of several glasses, in which there were colorful drinks, topped with some fruits whose names she did not know. They appealed to her just by their looks.

Underneath the glasses was the store's name: Evelyn's Complex

Wine House.

At the end of the board was an additional line in a smaller font: New release of Chaos Drinks. 50% off on your first drink. Feel free to try out.

Chaos Drinks?

Lorgar's brow went up. She thought this was a pretty lame name, for the two words bore no relationship whatsoever. A person who had never tried it out might not know what kind of drink it was. No wonder they had to put it on sale to attract people.

But the store name clearly suggested that it was a tavern.

Since the name suggested multi-flavor drinks, Lorgar believed they must offer wines. Judging from the spacious, bright interior and customers coming and going, she concluded the drinks should not be too bad.

Lorgar patted her money bag over her chest and headed to the tavern.

...

"She wasn't telling all the truth," Nightingale commented while chewing her dried fish, "especially the part concerning the reason she refuses to join the Witch Union. I could sense a great fluctuation in her emotions. To make sure, it'd be better to ask Wendy to conduct a '10-question' test."

Roland shook his head in amusement. "That's the screening procedure for an applicant. She hasn't even submitted her application to join the Witch Union, so there's no need to probe into her background. Plus, Lorgar came to Neverwinter to fight against demons and train herself, of which, you're positive, right?"

"She didn't lie on that for sure." Nightingale twitched her lips.

"So that's it. We founded the Witch Union initially to provide you with a place where you belong. There's no point to force people to

join. Plus, it's normal for a person to take precautions when coming to a foreign city. Let her be." Roland waved away the subject, pretending that he did not care, although he indeed felt a little disappointed.

He had an urge to stroke the wolf girl particularly when he saw her twitchy, fluffy, long ears. Also, her waggy tail intrigued him a great deal. Roland wondered whether his strength would leave him as it did in the modern world when he touched the root of the tail.

But he managed to suppress his incessant crazy ideas in the end.

He had to act accordingly with a majestic air, definitely not because of the presence of Nightingale, but because he was a king.

While Roland was thinking about checking upon the construction of the "Miracle Building" at the scene, Barov, the City Hall Director, suddenly knocked on the door and presented himself.

"Your Majesty, the members of Joint Chamber of Commerce have arrived at the castle district. They wish to see you."

Chapter 835: Multiple Ways of Selling Chaos Drinks

It took Roland a while to remember that Joint Chamber of Commerce was a supply and marketing cooperative organization formed under his leadership, whose main members were wealthy merchants from several big Fjords islands.

Although they had reached a basic mutual understanding last fall, the number of Chaos Drinks produced by Evelyn at that time had not been high enough to meet a wholesale's standard. As a consequence, each Chamber of Commerce had simply taken a few samples and had yet to officially put them on the market. This time, they came here to finalize the unfinished business.

Since the whole Western Region was preparing for the unification of the kingdom and that Roland was preoccupied with the upcoming winter attack and the desert mission plan, Joint Chamber of Commerce seemed to have, temporarily, slipped out of his mind. Now their arrival saved Roland trouble to look for them himself.

"Take them to the drawing room. I'll be right there," said Roland. After Barov replied a "yes" and withdrew, he turned to Nightingale and said, "Send for Tilly and Wendy here as well, for this is essentially the first collaboration between the Witch Union and the Sleeping Island."

All the merchants rose and bowed to Roland when he entered the drawing room.

It took Roland some time to match the faces with their names, except for his old acquaintance Margaret, Gammon and Marleen from Chamber of Commerce of Crescent Moon Bay. The others were Nibelung from Chamber of Commerce of Shallow Water Town and Atiyer from Chamber of Commerce of Sunset Island.

As soon as they sat down, Nibelung ventured, "Your Majesty, the samples we took last time caused a big stir among merchants on the island. Everybody fell in love with it after he tasted it. I assure you that Chaos Drinks will be the most successful and popular commodity in Fjords in the history of time once we start selling them!"

Atiyer chimed in. "And it isn't just a drink. For example, that fiery red spicy juice. Although it doesn't quench thirsts, it's a great sauce for steamed fish or barbeques. Besides, it can warm you up and refresh your spirit in a more efficient way than your white liquor. At least, white liquor will make you dizzy if you drink too much and it doesn't come in handy when you're on a ship, whereas that juice doesn't have such problems!"

Margaret nodded smilingly. "True. Not only merchants but many explorers are attracted to Chaos Drinks. A drink that can keep them warm without creating any side effects may save them in the event of a shipwreck."

Atiyer continued, "In this light, I suggest marking Chaos Drinks with various price tags. A drink with special functions like this should definitely have a higher price tag if we do a bit of marketing, not to mention that the number is limited."

Roland cast him an approving glance. Apparently, Atiyer had viewed the drink as some sort of energy drink. It was indeed true that successful merchants from Fjords were all good at sniffing out great potential business opportunities. They were able to notice the distinctive features of various Chaos Drinks just through a few samples. They knew selling them at different prices was the best way to reap profits.

Roland clapped his hands. "Since it has a good reception, we can move onto its sale according to the contract we signed earlier. I think none of you has objections to the pre-order price or the distribution for each district. However, you need to put a 30% deposit to pick up your orders. You should have brought sufficient

gold royals, right?"

Since they had reached an agreement on the primary terms on Joint Chamber of Commerce last year, there were now not many details left. The main reason Roland sent for Tilly to witness the signature was to prove that he did not tamper with the commission rate. Since Tilly had promised to stay at Neverwinter and had agreed to send the witches on the Sleeping Island overtime to the Western Region, Roland felt it necessary to return something to demonstrate his sincerity.

Based on the "win-win contract" signed during the Months of Demons, it was agreed that 30% of both the deposit and final sale profits should go to City Hall, the Witch Union and the Sleeping Spell.

"Of course, Your Majesty." Nibelung grinned. "There's no cargo on my ship this time, but only shiny gold royals plus some masons and sailors."

"Then let's go check the goods out." Roland smiled.

...

The drink factory specially built for Evelyn was across the alcohol plant. In fact, the building looked more like a fully-guarded warehouse than a factory.

It did not take a lot of spaces. The first floor was only a little over 100 square meters. The building itself was constructed of concrete and bricks, windowless, with a solid iron gate posed as its sole entrance. Like an invaluable military base, the premises was guarded by the new recruits of the First Army.

After Roland led the merchants across the yard, into the building and down the basement along the staircases, they found themselves in a spacious room around three or four times bigger than the ground floor. Like a villa's wine cellar, the basement was segmented by neatly organized wooden wine racks. To avoid fire

losses, no open flames or connected wires were allowed in here. They used skylight for the wine cellar's illumination. Because of this, the place was a little dim.

On each wooden rack rested two rows of wooden barrels, but not every barrel contained Chaos Drinks. Evelyn only produced one barrel of drinks every day and there were currently just 100-odd barrels in total, minus those consumed by Roland and distributed to the members of the Witch Union monthly.

Roland tapped the barrel, and the liquid in it produced a dull churning sound. "We can provide 20 barrels of Chaos Drinks per month. Each Chamber of Commerce will have five barrels on average. As long as our production remains the same, you'll get the same amount of products every time, no matter how long it takes you to sell them out. Whether you come to pick up your orders every three months or half a year, our stocks won't change. All the 100 barrels you can pick up this time are here on the wooden racks in the first row. Once you've checked the goods, I'll send men to deliver them to the dock area."

"You don't let us have a taste before the delivery?" Gammon was surprised.

"This isn't wine whose flavor grows mellower as time passes by." Roland shrugged. "Some Chaos Drinks do have a relatively long shelf life, but not every one of them does. Therefore, after the brewing is done, we have to first sterilize and preserve them."

"S, sterilize?"

"Like food, they'll go bad. The hotter, the faster. Sterilization can slow down the process. You don't need to know how it's done, but you ought to remember that once we open the wooden barrel, the drinks won't keep the taste as good as they initially do." Roland spread out his hands. "You can sell them as fast as you can or stock them. As long as you store them in shades and keep them cool, they should last for at least one or two months."

"But... as Atiyer has mentioned, each Chaos Drink is different. Some may be more popular than the others. If you don't let us taste them first, how are we going to choose the better ones?" Gammon questioned hesitatively. "Could you divide the drink in each barrel into four equal portions and then preserve them? In that case, we don't need to worry about which one we should pick."

Roland thought that would add Soraya and Lily's work by several times. He would certainly choose not to do something that consumed more industrial production resources but yielded no benefits. So he replied, "Sterilization isn't easy. If we divide the products into four portions, each Chamber of Commerce will have fewer stocks but more varieties of drinks, which would do no good to the sale. As to their flavors..." Roland paused for a second and then said, "The Northern Region and the Western Region have completely different needs for wines and drinks. The unpopular drinks here may be well received there. As merchants who transport goods to various places all the time, you should know it very well."

"Um, well..." Gammon was at a loss for words for a moment.

Roland secretly twitched his lips. He certainly would not allow them to taste the drinks, for he had already put a lot of efforts in the distribution of the products itself. Further, according to their contract, it was agreed that the drinks should be sold in barrels and that there were no specific terms stipulating the product quantity. If there were a few unpopular drinks that they were not willing to purchase, Neverwinter would suffer losses, because every barrel of drinks required the same amount of Evelyn's magic power.

"Anyway, the flavor isn't the point, but your selling method is. You should get most out of each drink and find your niche." Roland tapped the barrels again. "Well, come pick the Chaos Drinks you like."

Chapter 836: Signs of Change

Despite some hard selling happening, the Fjords businessmen still finally accepted this method of selection. They all knew that if they quit now, the others would only take over their share. Eagerly wanting to become distributors for these exclusive products, they did not mind such a little compromise.

And they also could not deny that what Roland said had some truth to it. The samples that they had brought back before, despite the notable differences in taste, could not be matched by the fruit wine or other drinks on the market. So the difference lay mainly in the amount of profit. Since they were all responsible for sales in different regions, the possibility of competition was not high, thus further reducing the risk of selecting an inferior product.

Roland was chuckling to himself as he observed Gammon and the others pacing back and forth around the barrel. Some were nose sniffing and even trying to find some residual appearance of the beverage. Though the buckets looked ordinary from the outside, the interior had a layer of membrane made by Soraya. This completely isolated the air inside and outside, therefore the nose would certainly not be able to smell any difference.

Taking advantage of the crowd picking out the Chaos Drinks, he quietly pulled Margaret aside and whispered, "The buckets on both sides of No. 10 and No. 24 have quite tasty drinks. At least I personally like them very much."

The latter looked astonished. "Your Majesty..."

"You can take that as a gift," said Roland with a light laugh. "If it wasn't for the first batch of businessmen that you brought, the Western Region might have taken two or three years more before it could look like this. Though your intention wasn't to do business with Border Town, the town still reaped the benefits, so this reward is nothing." He paused and said, "But of course, it would

only be for this time. After all, if you get good cards each time, the others will certainly become suspicious."

He had pretty much said all the facts. At that time, the steam prototype had been cumbersome and difficult to operate, and had only been suitable for the simplest drainage and haulage work. There had not been too many sales markets in the Western Region. Had she not introduced it to the Silver City mineral traders, thus opening up a high-profit trade route, the initial accumulation would have been more difficult.

Not to mention Margaret's Chamber of Commerce was responsible for the sales in the Graycastle area, so monopolizing the local market through the first batch of higher quality products was also a good choice.

"In that case, I accept your gift." The businesswoman did not do much to refuse—in dealing with people, she really resembled Thunder who was cheerful, generous, and uncalculating. After briefly saluting Roland, Margaret laughed and said, "Since I have received your gift, I can't do nothing in return. I might as well reveal to you a good news."

"What do you mean?" Roland asked, raising his eyebrows.

"The first group of businessmen you mentioned, which includes my old friend Hogg, plan to visit the Western Region this period." She lowered her voice and said, "But from his letter, it seems that this time it would be more than just him—the machines that you sell have spread in the Central Region of the kingdom, and almost all the mining businessmen are now asking him about the rail-transport system. And in about six months, your plant will be busy all day long."

"Is that so?" Roland was a little startled, then smiled and nodded his head. "That does seem like a good news to celebrate."

However, only he knew that there was a heartfelt sense of accomplishment after hearing this news.

"This day has finally come," he thought.

Over the past two years, he had sold a total of nearly 100 steam engines, of which only 30% belonged to the kingdom. At the beginning of the establishment of Graycastle Industrial Co., the monthly output was only an appalling two or three units. This output could hardly meet the demand of his own domain, but he still sold a part of it to Silver City. He had been looking forward to this day.

Such a scarce source of power is almost negligible for the industrial revolution, but it was a sign of a change from manpower to machinery and of a new mode of production. When everyone noticed the power of this new source of energy and wanted to follow suit, the change would start.

He believed that this interest-based change was almost impossible to stop. Its effect would be more than 10 million times better than just selling and promoting products, and its energy would be enough to change the whole era.

Today, Neverwinter was no longer like before. The output of one day in an industrial park today was equivalent to one month's output in the past. After the plants adopted three shifts, it would grow even more. Most importantly, a large number of apprentices who had received elementary education were steadily turning into workers—they had never touched a hammer nor built a sword, but had learned how to use machinery to produce machines. As long as the time was ripe, there would be an unprecedented eruption of productivity in Neverwinter in this era.

From Margaret's news, Roland seemed to envision that this moment was now not far away from him.

...

Two days later, the Fjords merchants left Neverwinter with their selection of Chaos Drinks, and Barov eagerly went into Roland's office with a thick pile of books.

Judging from the chief's smiling expression that almost covered his eyes, Roland knew that the results this time must have been quite good.

However, after opening the statistics sheet, he did not linger on the deposit amount but instead focused his attention on the new arrivals.

According to the agreement of the last meeting, Sunset Island and Shallow Water Town would each provide 300 craftsmen in exchange for completing the transformation of the paddle steamer in five years. The wealthy Crescent Moon Bay was even more direct and used 2,000 people and 50,000 gold royals to purchase a steel ship with no sails. Although both were aiming to get the knowledge of shipbuilding technology, Roland did not care about this and instead treated it as a bargaining chip—as long as they were willing to leave their people in his city, he would be fine with giving them not only manufacturing methods and techniques, but even design drawings.

Therefore, they also made a lot of effort this time. According to Barov's statistics, the number of craftsmen brought by the Fjords trip was 10% to 20% more than the agreed number. Most of them were old-timers with many years of experience in shipbuilding and carpentry, hence its intention was self-evident: Neverwinter did not prohibit technical skills from being mastered by other cities. This meant that when the contract was completed, other than those who were treated as part of the transaction, the others would learn all the skills and return to the Fjords.

Unfortunately, they did not understand the technical terms of the new era.

Roland could not help but raise the corners of his mouth. The people of the Fjords would soon realize that if they wanted to produce their own steamship, they would have to buy raw materials, equipment, key parts and components from Neverwinter... In the end, they would only be more dependent on

Graycastle, like small countries without complete industrial capabilities in the modern world where he had lived.

He lifted the quill, drew a circle below the total number of these tradesmen, and returned the statistics sheet to Barov.

"Help the arrivals to settle in and call Karl Van Bate so that together you can make a financial plan based on what the industrial park is doing right now," said Roland. "We have to build a few more plants."

Chapter 837: Letters to Sleeping Island

Tilly sat at her desk and was writing a secret letter meant for the Sleeping Island.

Since she would be using the carrier pigeon, so she had to reduce the size of the writing, and use the most concise language to express herself.

The content was actually not complicated and could be completed in two or three sentences. But somehow, she could not stop writing. She was in an uncontrollable mood and felt like she was writing a long family manual—letting her thoughts run wild was certainly a rare occurrence for her.

However, Tilly unexpectedly found out that this feeling was not bad.

Since it was not a matter of life and death, she decided to go with this feeling.

Slim ink marks slowly moistened on the stationery, and she could not help but feel a sense of warmth.

"Dear Camilla,"

"The Months of Demons is now over and the Western Region is calm again. Victory Day celebrations were particularly interesting. Do you remember the hot pot that I told you about? Roland moved this cooking method to the town square, with four huge woks of boiled soup, and then the meat, vegetables, whole chicken and Bird Beak Mushrooms were thrown into the soup. The fragrance could be smelt across the other side of Redwater River. He also said the pot was a feature of Neverwinter that definitely had to be tasted."

"With Roland's encouragement, everyone put all kinds of food in their pots. I have to say that with a thick soup, no matter what I ate, my mouth was full of flavor. There was no difference between City Hall officials, the Witch Union, or ordinary subjects. This

scene would have been impossible in the past. It is hard to imagine that a cruel war that will determine the fate of the world will follow this passionate scene. It is also precisely because of this, that this kind of joy is especially precious."

"I'm writing these to tell you that Neverwinter is really an incredible place—and I'm not trying to remove your prejudice against the nobility, but Roland Wimbledon is not a noble at all. Not surprisingly, I just confirmed our speculation. He is exactly like us, the so-called noble identity was only a passage of time or a cover-up. So you should also take a look at this new city. Sleeping Island, certainly needs guarding, but I don't want you to view this responsibility like a cage."

"And by the way, in these Months of Demons, our witches finally no longer just stood idly by. Roland's plan of the Southernmost Region was carried out by Ashes, Andrea and Echo. As for the interesting things happening in the desert, I won't go into details here and we can talk about it later on. And I believe that the Sleeping Island will inevitably become even more important after the other sisters come."

"To the Chief Butler of Sleeping Island?" Just then a hand suddenly came out from behind Tilly and placed a cup of azure drink in front of her.

"Well," she smiled, and she knew that it was Ashes without turning her head. "I was just writing about you. Would you like to take a look?"

"I'd better not," Ashes rubbed her shoulders and whispered. "I still have to prepare today's dinner."

"Then you'd better go. I look forward to your delicious dishes," Tilly laughed. The witches generally dined with Roland in the castle's living room, so the small kitchen in their apartment was less likely to be used. But since they had been separated for months, Ashes wanted to share their dinner alone, and of course

she would not refuse. Not to mention that Ashes also mysteriously claimed to have obtained a magical condiment from the Southernmost Region.

After she drank the Chaos Drink that was refreshing like an Icespring, she then continued writing.

"After chitchatting so much, now let's talk about serious stuff."

"According to my agreement with him, spring is when the relocation will take place. Now the time has come for action, and my idea hasn't changed. Everything has gone as expected and was even more perfect, hence we should just follow the plan—I believe you are already well prepared."

"After the Months of Demons ends, the Fjords' trade roads will soon be busy and I'm afraid it will be difficult to hire enough ships and sailors. If you encounter such a problem, you can ask Thunder for help. He's currently seeking Sealine adventurers, so ships and people are not a problem. Before the steel ship that Roland built for him is ready, Thunder will remain at the Fjords. As long as we can get in contact with him, he will surely help us."

"In addition, do not forget to advertise to the lords and merchants of Fjord Islands about our whereabouts. Also, inform them that the Sleeping Spell will continue to be open to all. Don't worry that after the relocation, part of the witches will be too far away from the Fjords. Now that Western Region Shallow Beach has been put into use, and Roland also intends to build a new port in the Endless Cape for replenishment, this means Neverwinter vessels can easily reach the Fjords."

"And I have a hunch that it will not take long before this route becomes the busiest trade route between the mainland and the islands; it will become a normal thing to cross the Straits, especially when the converted paddle steamer in the harbor is completed."

"It is important to remember this, Camilla. Migration to the

Western Region does not mean giving up the Sleeping Island." Neverwinter is the front line against the demon and the most dangerous Stronghold since the start of the Battle of Divine Will. As a part of humanity, we should try our best to make a contribution to fight against the enemy. Even Roland cannot guarantee victory. When the Western Region is captured by the enemy, the only place we can go to would be the Fjords islands."

"Although it would be better if such a thing did not happen. Anyway, we still have hope as long as the Sleeping Island is still there."

"Take care,"

"Tilly Wimbledon."

Princess Tilly let out a deep breath after writing. Camilla Dary, originally a noble of the old king's city, knew quite well the dirty secrets among the nobility and that caused her to completely lose total in that class. Although Camila still supported all the decisions she had made, the last time that they had spoken, the housekeeper had faintly hinted that she would stay behind in the Sleeping Island forever.

However, Tilly felt that though Sleeping Island was important, it should not be a place to stay alone. The guardians could take turns, and everyone should have the opportunity to come to Graycastle to re-experience the normal life. This was what she would like to see. Of course, this letter might not completely convince Camilla. But as more and more witches came to the Western Region, she believed that Camilla would change her original view.

Tilly put down the quill, rolled the paper into a circle of paper, and then fastened the string.

When Honey was called over, she was shocked to see five or six scrolls of paper on the table.

"Will they be sent to the Sleeping Island?" she asked.

"Yes, and all of them have to be sent to Camilla," said Tilly, nodding her head, "... Is that too much?"

"It doesn't matter, since it's Your Highness Tilly's letter, it'll have to be sent in any case!" Honey patted her chest and said, "now I'll go to catch two seabirds for you. Whether it's a secret document or even a honey grilled fish, it can also be sent!"

Looking at the girl jumping up and down as she left the room, Princess Tilly could not help but walk to the window and look towards the direction of the Fjords.

Before long, the witches that forced to leave their homeland would once again set foot on this piece of land.

Starting with Neverwinter, everything about them would be rewritten.

By that time, the Western Region would be many times more lively than it was now.

She was sincerely looking forward to that day.

Chapter 838: A Special Day

When the sky was just turning white, Broken Sword was already completely awake.

She stood up, walked to the window and pushed it open. The slightly chilly morning breeze suddenly poured into the room, bringing with it a chill of melting snow, with the fragrance of the coming spring. The faint blue sky was not yet completely illuminated, but from the sparse clouds, it could be seen that today would be a good day.

After putting on her clothes, she walked to the living room and discovered that a plate of roasted nuts and a can of vegetable soup were already laid out on the table for four people—amongst them, Annie always got up early, and would not only be the first to finish washing, she would also occasionally make breakfast.

After they officially joined the Witch Union, they moved from the Foreign Affairs Building to the Witch Building and could have their meals anytime at the castle, but Annie still chose to prepare breakfast herself sometimes. In the first month after receiving her salary, she went to the convenience market to buy cooking materials such as firewood, butter and salt. She also went to the wild to collect some wild fruits and vegetables every week.

Broken Sword curiously asked why she did so, and Annie's answer was simple. She said survival in the wilderness

was a skill, and if not practiced for a long time, it would be forgotten. If it was time to escape again, how could they ensure survival?

Broken Sword could not understand why Annie was always ready to wander. But having said that, occasionally tasting these wild fruits was not bad.

"Good morning." She sat at the table and pulled at her nuts. "Are

you going to the factory today?"

"Yes." Annie nodded and finished the remaining hot soup in the bowl. "There are some big objects that can't be pushed out by the workers. The machine can't plug in that big thing, and it can only be joined by small iron pieces. Miss Anna was doing it all before, but it's all up to me now."

From her voice, Broken Sword could hear a trace of vague satisfaction and sense of accomplishment, which was probably the most significant change since the four came to Neverwinter—their ability was no longer something meaningless. Working for His Majesty and getting paid was like a craft. The experience of relying on oneself instead of swindling or relying on the charity of others gave Broken Sword a sense of being reborn. She believed that Annie had the same feeling, or she would not get up early every day and be the first to head to the factory, even without any pressure to survive.

But today was a special day.

"Don't forget that today Hero..."

"I know." Annie looked a lot more serious. "Rest assured, I'll finish my chores earlier and come in time."

Broken sword became more relieved. "Well, she can feel more at ease with you around."

"Then I'll make a move first." She got up and left.

"Go, I'll take care of Hero."

"The hot water is in the kitchen and the rest is up to you." Annie did not speak much and quickly left home.

Broken Sword went to the kitchen to get a basin of hot water after eating her share. She crept lightly into Hero's bedroom. As Hero had lost her legs, she would still sleep with Annie even if there were enough rooms. In the daytime, the other three witches would take turns to take care of her. Miss Iffy and Lady Wendy

would also come to help sometimes.

What was surprising to her was that Hero was already awake and sitting on the bed. She was looking out at the brightness through the window. The soft shimmer of her lilac hair and fair complexion made her look extremely pleasant. And under this light, it was hard to imagine how brutal a treatment she had been subjected to.

However, Broken Sword quickly regained her senses and realized that Hero might not be as calm as she looked on the surface. That could be why she woke much earlier than usual.

"Good morning," she said.

"Ah... good morning," said Hero, as if she was recovering from a daze, and said apologetically, "sorry to trouble you again."

"It's no trouble at all," said Broken Sword, sticking out her tongue. "No one would think so. And maybe after today, you'll be able to do it yourself."

Suddenly, Hero's eyes flashed a very complex look of tension, anticipation, fear, and excitement... After a while, she managed to control her emotions and forced herself to smile. "I don't know if I can—I have forgotten completely the feeling of walking, even if in a dream, I..." She bit her lip and continued, "I can only crawl forward."

"So you can learn from the beginning. It's not a big deal," said Broken Sword, pressing on her shoulder. "Even God's Punishment Witch can do it, and surely you can as well. Come, try to raise your legs."

Hero took a deep breath, opened the quilt, and saw two thin, branch-like legs exposed—they were different from a few months ago. Her legs which had been severed from the knees grew much longer, almost to the ankle position, and the ugly scars had also become smoother. They looked crumpled and different from

normal legs and seemed as if they could snap off at any moment. But at least, they were much better than before.

This result was the joint effort made by the Witch Union.

At first, Nana could only recover minor wounds such as severed fingers, and the regrowth of the whole limb could not be achieved until the four witches joined the Witch Union. Broken Sword followed the instructions of His Majesty Roland to complement Nana with her strengthening ability and achieved a breakthrough —holding a sword which Broken Sword transformed into, Nana's healing ability had been fully upgraded, and even a hunting dog with broken feet could grow new claws.

This new discovery brought a ray of hope to Hero's recovery.

However, the test that started later was not that easy.

First of all, Nana's healing effect only took effect on the wound, and Hero's broken leg had already healed. If they wanted to recover her legs, they had to create new wounds in them. Secondly, even with Broken Sword's magic, treatment could only last for dozens of minutes, which meant that the recovery process had to be carried out in several stages. The combination of these two points posed a formidable challenge to both the healer and the patient.

Hero had to repeatedly suffer the pains of wounds in her broken legs, and Nana had to cut her legs several times to make them grow. This treatment program was problematic from the beginning.

Fortunately, Lady Wendy noticed this problem and mobilized the entire Witch Union.

Broken Sword realized for the first time that they called each other sisters and this was not just a term, but they felt like a family from the bottom of their hearts. Though the four of them came from the Kingdom of Wolfheart, and joined Neverwinter not too

long ago, they were not stingy about their affections for each other.

Miss Leaf used a special plant called the sleeping fern to cultivate unconscious herbs that when consumed, one would not wake up for hours. Thus this helped to relieve Hero's suffering.

Cutting was carried out by Miss Anna. Under the sharp Blackfire, the formation of a new wound could be completed instantly, and Nana only needed to focus on her ability.

Finally, Marquess Spear Passi, the lord of a city, did not return immediately after the meeting at Fallen Dragon Ridge because of Hero. The previous treatments had been cautious—Nana's magical powers had been depleted every time to recover sections of legs which were as short as a half of a finger. Once her ability had been exhausted, the open wounds would have soon become lethal. Therefore, the recovering process had been extremely slow. With the help of Marquess Spear, recent treatments had made considerable progress.

If everything went smooth, Hero would regain her full feet after today.

Chapter 839: Hero's Tears

Broken Sword put on the protective socks for Hero, and carried her to the wheelchair. She gave Hero a simple wash and breakfast... Amy, her next door neighbor, also woke up. When everything was ready, they pushed the wheelchair and went to the hospital.

Hero was much more nervous than usual and hardly spoke along the way. Fortunately, Amy helped to make the atmosphere more lively, so that the tension would not affect Broken Sword.

As for Amy herself... probably optimism was her nature, so she could smile at any moment, even when she was fleeing to the Kingdom of Dawn—this always made Broken Sword envious.

It was almost 9:00 am when they arrived at the hospital. When they had just entered the courtyard, the three of them saw Lady Wendy waiting at the entrance.

No, not only Wendy, but there were also Scroll, Anna, Leaf, Mystery Moon and Lily... Almost all of the Witch Union members were gathered there waiting for their arrival.

Although she was not the patient, Broken Sword still felt a sudden surge of warmth. She even felt her eyes getting sour and tearing up.

There was a slight tremor in the wheelchair and she knew that Hero was becoming emotional.

"His Majesty and Marquess Spear have been waiting for you in the medical room," Wendy said with a smile, touching Hero's head. "Don't worry, you'll regain your freedom soon."

"His Majesty?" Broken Sword sounded surprised. "His Majesty Roland has come?"

"Who else could it be," exclaimed Mystery Moon, "only His Majesty could make Lily put down her microscope and the weird

worms."

"Don't talk nonsense!" Lily shouted and tried to cover Mystery Moon's mouth.

This made the three chuckle, and eased their nervous mood a little.

Wendy shook her head reluctantly. "Let's not let His Majesty wait too long."

Broken Sword pushed the wheelchair into the medical room, and after saluting the king and the Marquess, carefully carried Hero to the bed.

Just as Hero was about to take the herb, Annie finally rushed over.

She grasped Hero's hand gently, just like in the past and said, "I'll be here until you wake up."

This sentence seemed to have an incredible magic, as Broken Sword saw the girl finally settle down on the bed.

On the long flight to the Kingdom of Dawn, it was Annie who had been busy taking care of these three girls that had no experience of the wild and had brought them safely there. In the process, they had all regarded Annie as the backbone, believing that as long as she was there, any problems could be solved.

Shortly after swallowing a pill, Hero fell asleep.

"Let's get started," Wendy said to Broken Sword.

She nodded and closed her eyes—in an instant, the five senses disappeared instantly, just as if they been thrown into the void. However, this feeling lasted only for a few moments, and soon she "watched" things around again—through the eyes of Miss Nana.

Her experience after exerting the ability was amazing, and she could even see herself as a short, thin "dagger," with vibrant, greenish soft lights flowing between the blade.

This willow-like dagger was a suggestion made by His Majesty. He said waving a sword in front of the bed was too weird, and it would be better if she could become a short dagger. He also gave this kind of weapon a weird name, a scalpel.

Suddenly, a surging magic burst into her body, and her sense of fullness made her start to hum. Of course, only the girl holding her could hear this slight moan.

"Still very uncomfortable?" Nana brought the scalpel in front of her.

"Much better than the previous ones," Broken Sword took a deep breath—though it was only her subconscious move. After all, the weapon did not breathe. "It doesn't matter. I can stand it. Feel free to use it."

This powerful magic Broken Sword felt came from Leaf when Spear Passi connected the two of them together. Fortunately, Miss Leaf's ability itself had the characteristics of vitality and moisture, so after adaptation it would not be too uncomfortable. This was unlike Anna's Blackfire, which was hard, sharp and cold, as if it were covered with steel needles. This, plus her magic capacity, was almost unbearable for Broken Sword.

Therefore, when working with witches, only a few cooperated with Miss Anna.

After becoming a blade, she could have a conscious connection with the user but also became faintly aware that the witch's magic and her own character were not unrelated. Most witches' temperament could always be felt from the fluctuation of magic. So it was very difficult to understand, how Anna who looked so approachable and smart, though she spoke very little, could give her such a feeling magically.

Anna removed Hero's socks, and her fingertips showed a dark, thin line, that bound her legs like a rope.

Broken Sword could not help but shiver.

She had seen it with her own eyes, that when necessary, this Blackfire was able to instantly melt the metal and burn it up. But for now it felt just like Anna's magical power, a hard and cold icy filament.

The black line soon vanished, and Broken Sword knew it had shrunk into a tiny black spot. In this shrinking process, in which the skin, blood vessels, and bones were neatly cut—because the cutting surface was too flat, so it took a while before a circle of bloodstains gradually emerged.

The sliced amputated limb was less than a finger thick, and Nana already stripped off the epidermis, driving the magic to wrap the wound.

Broken Sword has seen the next treatment many times.

Bloody red wounds began to grow forward under the old skin and grow out new pink skin. The magic of the two bodies also flew quickly, without a steady input from Leaf, they would soon be depleted.

About half an hour later, a complete pair of feet finally appeared in front of everyone.

Nana's energy also reached its limit, throwing off the scalpel. She was holding the bed and gasping with her forehead covered with fine sweat beads.

And Broken Sword was not much better. The whole process for her, was like constantly inflaming the internal organs. Even after the restoration of the original appearance, the whole body was still sore.

The little girl was brought by Wendy to the next room to take a break, but Broken Sword insisted on staying.

She wanted to be with Annie and Amy, to see Hero wake up for the first time.

...

After the sleeping fern's effects faded, Hero slowly opened her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Wendy helped her sit up in bed, softly asking, "Can you feel them?"

She shook her head first, as if she wanted to throw the drowsiness out of her mind, then widened her eyes and stared at her own feet where there had only been bald broken legs with ugly scars, nothing else.

Everyone held their breath, and cast their gaze on the back of her foot. The medical room was silent for a moment.

Suddenly, her slender toe trembled slightly.

Broken Sword's heart also fluttered. She even thought it was her own illusion so she blinked and looked again.

The toes fluttered twice and like rusty scissors that had not moved for a long time, jerked and slowly bent.

Her uneasy heart finally felt assured and she just wanted to cheer. But she saw Hero's eyes flash two drops of tears. She was stunned, as even during the most difficult period, she had never seen Hero shed a tear.

"Than..." Hero swallowed as soon as she opened her mouth, and for a long time failed to complete her sentence, but all the people present understood her meaning. "Thanks... thank..."

Annie leaned over and Hero burst into tears in Annie's arms.

Chapter 840: Black Blood

After Roland returned to the castle, Roland still could not feel peace in his heart. As the saying goes, people would shed tears of delight. But in his view, Hero cried not only out of delight but it was also a way to pour out all her suppressed emotions after suffering years of unfair treatment, pain, and false accusations.

In other words, the fact she put on a tough look did not necessarily mean that she did not feel pains. It was rather a mask underneath she hid all her true feelings. It was not an unnormal reaction for a girl who had just come of age before the misfortunes had weighed upon her. She had done very well in being strong and hopeful.

The treatment turned out successfully, and she regained a pair of normal feet. After being unable to walk for such a long time, it might take a while for her to control her feet again. However, since she could feel her new feet after the treatment, her feet nerve must have been well connected with her spinal nerve. With rehabilitation, she would be able to walk again sooner or later.

This treatment had also helped Roland to further confirm Broken Sword's ability—to increase the witch's "magic power limit".

Every witch had her power limit. Take Hummingbird's ability for an example. There were limits to the volumes of the objects of which she reduced weights, the lasting power of her magic and the extent of weight reduction. Once she passed one of the limits, the consumption of her magic power would multiply. It was like a rising index which could not go far beyond its normal value. To think it in another way, Hummingbird was unable to turn a huge mountain into something as light as a feather, nor could maintain her power effective forever. It would probably require an unimaginable amount of magic power to achieve that.

The same applied to Nana. The magic power she needed to

regrow the limbs was far beyond her magic power limit. That was why she could replant broken fingers but was unable to regrow limbs, not even with Leaf's help.

Broken Sword's ability helped increase such limits so that something that had been impossible became nearly possible. With Broken Sword's help, the witch did not have to consume a considerable amount of magic power at a time but they only needed to apply their ability several times.

From the drawer, Roland pulled out a stash of Wendy's reports that recorded the test results when Broken Sword worked with other witches and spread them on the desk.

The result showed that most witches' abilities sharply strengthened with the help of Broken Sword. The heightened limit enabled them to enhance the effectiveness of their work. For example, the Dawn I enchanted by Mystery Moon would work longer, from the previous five days to the current two weeks. The improvement was highly precious for Neverwinter, for the city was not in a position to generate electricity on a mass scale at present. After all, as the number of plants grew, the power supply for lighting was hitting a bottleneck.

Also, the consolidation effect enchanted by Candle could maintain longer with the Broken Sword's support, which was quite beneficial to the increase in service life of machine tools as well as the advancement the processing level. Now that so many green workers were sent to the plants, it was no surprise to see them break a dozen of boring cutters or several machines every day if Candle did not help.

In addition, Broken Sword also offered significant assistance to witches like Soraya, Agatha, Lucia, Paper, etc. who worked in the plants. Thanks to those witches, the industrial development in Neverwinter was still phenomenal even without a well-established regulatory agency and sufficient labors. Without the witches, there would be more accidents and breakdowns of the system due to the

dangerous and primitive production methods. Now with Broken Sword joining in, the production process would be safer and more efficient.

Roland concluded his report with his prediction that Broken Sword would be one of the busiest witches in Neverwinter.

In the afternoon, his guard Sean entered his office.

"Your Majesty, the Minister of Chemical Industry, Sir Kyle, hopes you can pay a visit to Lab Four. He said that there has been some progress in what you asked for."

"Oh?" Rowland's eyes brightened. "Rearrange my schedule. I'll be there immediately."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Roland, escorted by guards, arrived at Lab Four.

With the establishment of the acid plant and the nitration plant, the humble bungalows, which had been originally constructed as small workshops for both experiments and production, had become the veritable research center of Neverwinter. Now near the Redwater River, walls had been set up to separate the buildings. The research center was now guarded, equipped with a logistics team, and even the interior had been renovated. The outer wall of the building was repainted in a cream color, looking magnificent and grand.

Kyle Sichi did not show up at the gate of the building of Lab Four to greet Roland. Only the vice minister Chavez stood there, looking a little embarrassed, but Roland did not take it as an offense. He had known the Chief Alchemist a long time ago and was aware of what kind of person he was, so he just waved his hand and entered the building without a word.

Kyle was standing before a long lab table, his eyes glued to the liquid in the condenser pipe as it trickled down the beaker. The amber liquid was transparent, giving off an old and familiar smell.

There were some more beakers around it, in which there were liquids of different shades of colors.

Roland could not help drawing a deep breath.

It had been a long time since he smelled the scent of gasoline.

Certainly, gasoline was an inappropriate name for this crude product that was definitely incomparable to the widely used fuel in the modern world, although they did have the same scent. Roland still had a long way to go before it became a steady energy supply.

"Your Majesty." The Chief Alchemist, who just noticed Roland, placed his hand on his chest. "You're right. The Blackwater in the Southernmost Region indeed contains many liquid components. I've done some experiments according to the approaches described in 'Intermediate Chemistry' and found out that the components could be separated through distillation, but..." He paused to point at the beakers on the table. "If the sample is further distilled, the composition of each component present little difference."

"That means you did it right," Roland said carelessly, for he knew that they were all hydrocarbons, and Lucia would obtain the same result if she did the experiment. "Did you dig out something else?"

"The components are all combustible, and the upper layer of the liquids obtained from the distillation are more volatile in nature, like this one..." Kyle picked up the beaker with the amber liquid and slightly shook it. "It's like an explosion when it's ignited! Your Majesty, are you planning to make a more powerful explosive out of it?"

Roland chuckled as he gazed at the animated old alchemist, who, in his opinion, had finally improved and become a real chemist, because now, he could associate combustible materials with explosives.

In fact, the Blackwater was sampled in Endless Cape.

From the very beginning, he suspected it was the eruption of oil

wells that caused the so-called underground fire to burn constantly. Oil belonged to a big family. As oil was the lifeline of the modern industry and the essential material that had greatly influenced the World War, Roland had learned a lot about it. In fact, the difference between the oil sampled in the east and the west continents was so great, even greater than the skin colors of people in these two areas, that they could be considered as two entirely different liquids. The color of the oil varied dramatically, from golden, dark green to black, maroon, and even transparent. Some of the oil was as runny as water, while some thick and sticky; some could not be burned directly, while some highly inflammable...

In terms of their components, any mixture of hydrocarbons consisting of hydrogen and carbon could be taken as a kind of oil.

So, it was not strange to classify Blackwater as oil.

In other words, it did not matter whether Blackwater was similar to the oil in the modern world, as long as they could obtain combustible oil from it. After all, even people in the modern world had not been able to completely figure out where the oil came from, neither had they completed a thorough research on all the members of the oil family. Roland had heard people proclaim that oil would be used up in 50 years when he had been young, but it turned out that the reserves of the new oil fields discovered every year grew much faster than the consumption of the oil. Moreover, the summation of all the reserves of discovered oil fields had far exceeded the amount of the oil calculated based on the biotransformation hypothesis.

Chapter 841: The Application of Blackwater

However, the "underground Styx's River" that where Blackwater converged in the Southernmost Region was very unusual. According to Iron Axe's report, along the way from Choke Swamp to Endless Cape, Styx's River became less thick and the stagnant fog turned thin. Several Styx' s Rivers intersected at Blackwater Valley where men could even hear the roar of the water splattering onto the rocks beneath them when they were standing at a higher spot.

Roland speculated that the composition of the Styx's River water changed as it flowed. For example, the stagnant fog Iron Axe had described in his report might be a kind of toxic gas emitted by Blackwater, or a product of the reaction between some subterranean materials. That might explain the reason why during centuries of evolution, the natural lightning or man-made fire did not set the Blackwater Valley ablaze, and why no one could survive in Choke Swamp.

The stagnant fog shrouding the Styx's River not only stopped the Sand Nation people but also blocked fresh air, and thus guaranteed a steady flow of Blackwater toward the south. But as the underground river drew close to the Cape, it became thinner and finally disappeared. Only some part of the underground river would escape from the ground under pressure. Among them, some would set aflame, while some would turn into tiny streams and shallow puddles on the ground. Additionally, the stagnant fog dispersed at that point, providing a perfect environment for them to develop mines.

Roland had no idea about how many components could be separated out of that unique crude oil, so he just asked the Chief Alchemist to have some experiments first before making a further plan.

Luckily, the distilled components so far showed a very inspiring

prospect.

"No doubt that Blackwater can be used to make dreadful weapons, but it can do far more than that," Roland answered as he picked up the beaker and studied it carefully. "There's much we can benefit from it, even only from its high combustion heat. I'll let you know one day."

The best way to motivate a straightforward man like the Chief Alchemist would be raising his interest with new knowledge.

Roland laughed in silence as he saw the old man's desire was apparently not satisfied. He continued, "As to the experiment, it's not enough to just use several retorts and condenser pipes if we mean to put Blackwater into use. You have to figure out some plans, like the way we produce dioic acids, that will enable mass production"

The principle of oil separation was very simple, which could be regarded as the most basic chemical knowledge. Upon being heated, the raw oil would turn into steam that would later enter the connected distillation tower, where the steam of different components would successively condense due to their different boiling points. During this procedure, the finished oils such as gasoline, kerosene, diesel, heavy oil, etc. could be collected. The process was a complete physical transformation, so it would be very easy to achieve those materials under the current experiment condition.

Although the utilization rate of the raw oil of the modern world had been significantly improved as the technology of refinement was diversifying, the traditional distillation was still useful. As such, distillation was still the first choice when they did not take the cost factor into account.

Kyle Sichi was too well aware of the difficulty they would face if they wanted to upscale any lab experiments to a more complicated mass industrial production. He had to take lots of details into

account if they were going to put the distillation into practical production.

The old alchemist stroked his beard and said, "Um... I need a few days to plan it out, and I want the Witch Union's assistance."

That was a good sign that he asked for assistance from the witch voluntarily. Roland nodded. "Just let me know if you want anything. I'll see to it."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Kyle said, weighing his words. "Apart from this, I have one more small request."

"Oh? Go ahead."

"May I have the honor to see the new invention made from them when it's ready?" His voice was full of curiosity.

Theoretically speaking, the old alchemist had gone a little overboard since the project was meant to remain confidential. It was just like an engineer responsible for extracting uranium ore wanted to know the entire Manhattan plan. But Roland agreed after a short contemplation. After all, a little incentive could raise his passion for work, and Roland was confident that there was nobody who could compete with Neverwinter in terms of science and technology level in this era.

"You have to work hard." Roland pointed at the separated liquids and said, "The sooner you get the finished product, the earlier you will know the answer to your question."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty... Do you mean all of them?" Kyle asked in amazement. "They were indeed all combustible, but the liquid distilled in the lower tower was no better than snow powder. It produces thick smokes and doesn't burn well, not even good for lights."

"This guy, whose mind was still clinging to the explosive, takes any products that are less active as wastes," Roland thought. It was true that the light distillates in the upper tower were more

inflammable and its flame was more vigorous, but their usages were unexpectedly limited in practice. Without additives, even the slightest mistake would set them off, so they were barely helpful under the current condition. Instead, he favored the diesel and heavy oil distilled in the lower tower.

No doubt diesel would be a perfect fuel for the internal combustion engine. Even those mixed with impurities resulting from the inferior process were usable in practice. Their only problem was creating thick black smoke and thereby caused pollution when they burned, but that barely troubled Roland at this moment.

Heavy oil would play an essential role in navigation and was the optimal fuel for steam-powered boats. The current coal-powered boat might work well in inland rivers, but it was not powerful enough to sail on the sea, where the boat required huge power that coal failed to provide. To be honest, it had already been a laborious task for the boat to travel from Fjords to Shallow Beach of the Western Region. Therefore, Roland wanted to build Festive Harbor at the Endless Cape where he could supply oil to the steam-powered boat that was planning to cross the Sealine and enter the open ocean.

Furthermore, the requirement of producing heavy oil was the lowest. The roughly distilled heavy oil, even those mixed with asphaltic residue, was usable, so it might be one that could be most easily obtained in the oil family.

Of course, Roland would not tell Kyle about that. He could not guarantee anything before he got the finished oil. If the final result ran countered to his original deduction, it would taint his reputation for being omniscient. So he just shrugged and said, "All the oil components, including the residues and scraps, must be collected and categorized. They'll be useful for me."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the Chief Alchemist said with his hand across his chest.

"By the way." As Roland walked out of the room, he suddenly stopped at the lab doorway. He turned to look at Kyle and added, "Set up a tutorial session."

That took Kyle by surprise. He blurted out, "What?"

"I thought I've made my idea clear in the last agriculture meeting. We need to add an agriculture class to our secondary education curriculum. That will help us to train enough qualified men to handle the situation even if when we are going to spread Golden Twos to the entire kingdom," Roland elaborated. "And new plants will require more skilled people. As far as I can see, there're many people who intend to join the chemistry industry after finishing their universal education. You'd better have them trained before using them in case they mess everything up in the plant due to the lack of experience."

Letting people choose courses they were interested in was the same as college students select their own majors. Here in Neverwinter, the process took place earlier in middle school. Roland had thought on this matter for a long time, and he believed that since there was no time to train people with various skills currently, he had better start with training professional workers as soon as possible.

"Your Majesty, wasn't Lady Scroll supposed to... be responsible for that?"

"She handles the sections of recruitment, class composition, evaluation, and payroll, but the teacher must be from Ministry of Chemical Industry, so you have to see to it."

Kyle let out a sigh of relief as if he would have obeyed everything as long as Roland did not push him to teach students. His miserable memory was as fresh as yesterday. He had suffered enough during the process of recruiting and training some alchemy apprentices in order to earn "Intermediate Chemistry" from Roland. Kyle replied, "I see, Your Majesty." "I think the

alchemists from the king's city, who were adept at public speaking and advertising, are quite qualified for the teaching position. Do you think so?"

Chapter 842: Chicken-and-duck Knight

Prius Dessau's life had been going quite smoothly recently.

Like a dream, his service at the Elk Family had faded into oblivion over time. His skill and training as a knight had been long forgotten. His big belly could not fit in his old clothes. Instead, he bought baggy fabric pants and short silk robes, which not only were easy to manage but also enabled him to act like a gentleman—although he was aware that in His Majesty's domain there were no real nobles anymore.

Of course, his knighthood, which was not truly a dream, could still be evidenced by the shining armors displayed in his living room. Oddly enough, when he had been a knight of the Elk Family, he had disliked those armors so much that he had even considered selling them to a blacksmith at an unusually low rate. But after starting serving His Majesty, he began to feel these things pleasing to the eye. One of his hobbies now was holding his toddler and rambling about his 'valiant and heroic' fighting stories.

But in those stories, Prius had completely avoided mentioning Duke Ryan, as if he had always been an impeccable loyal minister to Roland Wimbledon.

After joining the City Hall, he had been continuously moving up in his career. Seizing the opportunity when the population of Neverwinter was rapidly growing, he expanded the chicken and duck aquiculture zone several times, and it now eventually turned it into a huge poultry factory. That was right, the poultry factory he created on his own was not by any means worse than the machine-manufacturing factories. After learning the term 'factory' from His Majesty, he immediately hung the board for his factory over the yard gate.

Nowadays factories sprang out in Neverwinter like mushrooms after rain. It was currently the most popular word in the City Hall.

Naturally, he did not want to be left behind.

After all, he had more than 100 employees; in his factory, there were almost 10,000 chickens and ducks which needed several baskets of fodders and earthworms each day, a scale he had never dreamed of. As to being called 'Chicken-and-duck Knight', he did not mind it; instead, he rather enjoyed it.

Now that his career was on track, Prius became idle. The first batch of apprentices had gained the skill of distinguishing poultry genders, feeding, filtering baby chickens, etc. Furthermore, they could even train newbies, which gave Prius much free time. Fowl plague, the most dreadful thing for raising poultries, could be easily dispelled by that witch Lily, so the scale of his factory could actually expand as large as he wished. Now, he only had to do planning and statistics work, and then the Minister of Agriculture would do the rest.

In fact, most of the other knights who had been captured with him were doing pretty well, except a few who were too stubborn to cooperate. His superior Sirius Daly, for instance, a former knight of the Wolf Family, had now become a minister, and he had the highest rank among all of them.

Morning Light, who had been promoted to an intermediate teacher, earned about the same as Prius. While doing small talk, Ferlin Eltek seemed to have mentioned that he had plans other than keep on teaching. It was hard to speculate where this former star knight would work, but it must be somewhere not too bad.

The other knights like Halon, Valsa, Kazan.... were either teaching or operating a business. Prius often met these old acquaintances when he had time, to chat about their daily lives, their work, and their expectations for the future. But not everybody was sincerely convinced by His Majesty. For example, Halon was not satisfied with the policy that forbade captured knights to join the army. As such, during their meetings, he was often in state of despondence because of his unfulfilled dream.

Prius did not agree with him. Everyone knew that flintlocks were very powerful weapons. If he were in charge, he would be unwilling to entrust these weapons to a defeated army.

As to himself, he laid eyes on the annual Award and Honor Ceremony—judging from His Majesty's emphasis on agriculture, he felt sooner or later he would stand on the platform in the square, being admired and respected by audiences. Not only would he accept the medal bestowed by His Majesty personally, but he would also get a prize of 100 gold royals, which was a much promising future than joining the army.

While he was on the way to City Hall, humming, and was about to greet Sirius Daly before going to the poultry factory, the minister stopped him.

"Ah, here you are. His Majesty is waiting for you."

Prius slowed down. "What's the matter?"

"The guard didn't tell. He only told me to tell you to go to the castle when you're here."

"I see." Prius pretended to be calm and self-collected, although his heart beat faster. "It's not long after the conference of the agriculture mobilization movement. Is His Majesty thinking the same as I do, to promote me as an honorary example?"

Full of expectations, he entered the castle. Under the guidance of a guard, he came to His Majesty's office door on the third floor.

"Come in," after introducing himself, a familiar voice came from the other side of the door. "I've been waiting for you for quite a while."

"Officer of the Ministry of Agriculture, Prius Dessau sends his best regards," as soon as he entered the room, he got to his knee and held a fist over his chest as a knight greeted a king. But due to the extra fat on his belly, the gestures he made were far less handsome than before, and he almost trapped himself while

kneeling down.

"Please rise." The king was sitting behind a long desk, smiling at him, and said, "You've been doing such a good job recently that even Barov can't stop praising you, which is rather rare. Therefore, I have a new task for you."

"I'm at your command." Prius stood up respectfully.

"Listen carefully... This is a top secret. Even in the City Hall, not many people know it," Roland said in a serious tone, "and it's so significant that it concerns the future development of Neverwinter. As soon as you accept it, you can't tell anyone what you see and hear without my permission. The reason I chose you is that you're the most suitable candidate considering there's nobody else has done it before, although you're not indispensable. If you can do it well, the compensation won't be an issue. I want your answer now."

Prius was startled. He did not expect His Majesty to make such a proposal at all. It had nothing to do with the medal, but His Majesty actually planned to give him a really tough task.

"Ah, forget about the significance, the competitive compensation... They mean nothing but trouble. To be involved in the king's secret is like a suicide." Subconsciously, he wanted to decline it, but he swallowed the words on the tip of his tongue. "Wait a minute. Who do you think the person is? He is the Lord of Neverwinter, the King of Graycastle!"

"When the King wants an officer to do something, does he need to consult the officer in advance? Unless the officer has planned to rebel and hide in his territory. Otherwise, he should take the order no matter what it is so as to not suffer a king's wrath. His Majesty doesn't order me directly is to care for my feelings, not to give me the chance to refuse."

Prius swallowed a mouthful of saliva. "Even though this king Wimbledon is different from most other lords, and he means every

word he says, didn't I just tell him 'I'm at your command?'

"I just expressed my loyalty, then I directly tell him that I don't want to or I'm unable to do it? If I were the king, I guess I would hold a grudge if not flying into a rage on the spot. In that case, not only won't I get promoted, but I might not even be able to be a common official either, not to mention the Award and Honor Ceremony and the abundant prize."

At this thought, Prius really wanted to slap himself.

After hesitating for quite a while, he eventually blurted out, "I'd like to take this task."

He could not afford to lose his position. He had lost his identity as a knight, and if he went on losing his official position as the superintendent of the poultry factory, he would really have nothing left at all.

At this moment, the only thing that comforted him was His Majesty's words 'you're the most suitable candidate considering there is no precedent'. "At least, this means a sort of confirmation of my capability?"

"Alright." Roland smiled and whispered something to the empty space beside him, and then looked at Prius and said, "Now follow me to a place."

"Where?" Prius asked immediately, anxious and a little panic.

"The Third Border City," the King said while raising his eyebrow.
"Have you heard of it?"

Chapter 843: The Conduct of A Loyal Official

Prius had never heard of this city. Border Town had become a place of residence because it was to serve the mine, and it had nothing to do with a 'city', let alone to prefix the city with 'the third'. Before His Majesty arrived in the Western Region, only the Longsong Stronghold deserved to be called a city.

When they arrived at the cave at the foot of North Slope Mountain, Prius understood what His Majesty had meant.

He had always been curious as to why the Ministry of Construction established a fortress-like building in Neverwinter. The location of a strategic point being guarded by the First Army was a bit strange. At its back was the North Slope Mountains, and to the left and right, there was too great a distance from the borders to defend against army invasions, let alone allow them to properly guard His Majesty's castle.

He asked some of his colleagues in City Hall, but none of them gave him a satisfactory answer. Some said the construction team there was under the direct management of Minister Carl, and others had no authority to inquire into it. Such being the case, Prius stopped asking. After all, he was only curious. There was no need to go so far as to get himself into trouble.

However, he never thought he would personally step into this military position.

When Prius saw the manmade underground aisle and a large cluster of caves, his jaw almost dropped.

"How did they make this?"

"One year ago, there was nothing in this area. Now, it's like the interior of the whole mountain has been connected. It's not exaggerating to call such a spacious underground area a city... but, could this have been done by men?"

Prius cast a furtive glance at His Majesty, to whom his awe deepened.

Duke Ryan had indeed picked the wrong opponent.

The Lion overwhelmed the other big families and had ruled the Western Region for over a decade and they made the once barren land as solid as a piece of iron. This was a manifestation of his perfect methods and capability, but... after all, he was just a human being.

What happened next shocked the Elk knight even more.

As he arrived at a flat and open hall, by the trailer, Prius saw two men dressed like warriors walk over to them—since the popularization of flintlocks in the First Army, guards dressed in this attire were rarely seen.

One of them looked Prius up and down before he turned to ask His Majesty, "Are you sure it's going to be alright?"

"Sooner or later, my subjects will know about it. Instead of concealing it, I think it's better to give them some time to accept it," Roland replied. "Let's start with the City Hall officials."

"Alright then..." The guard sighed helplessly. He then waved towards the dome above the hall. A flash of black shadow descended and quietly fell in front of the crowd.

Prius' heart pounded in his chest and he almost cried out!

"Oh my god, what the hell is that?"

Looking at the blob monster, full of tentacles, in front of him, he felt a chill as it crept up his spine "Even a demon from hell wouldn't look as horrible as that." The knight wanted to retreat but found that his feet had gone numb. The only reason he didn't fall to the ground was the calmness His Majesty exuded.

Then he "heard" a voice.

However, the soft female voice did not come from next to his ear,

but from directly within his head, "Your Majesty, nice to see you."

"Nice to see you too, Pasha," Roland said with a smile. "How are the worms?"

"Their number has increased. As long as there are mushrooms, it seems they'll just keep on eating."

"They do seem easy to feed."

"Yes, you can totally count on us."

"When the war starts, you won't have many hands to spare. Besides, I want to raise more than a thousand worms, so it's better to let them get familiar with it sooner."

Prius was startled—His Majesty talked so freely with the monster, just like he was talking with a common official. Not to mention the respect the monster showed towards His Majesty was totally different from the intimidating demons. "If ghosts and monsters in books talked like this, perhaps they wouldn't be as scary."

He took two deep breaths and he felt his racing heart slow down.

"What does His Majesty want me to raise? Worms?

"Besides... is this the big secret he warned me about? At the foot of the North Slope Mine is a concealed horrible nonhuman entity?"

His Majesty seemed to read his mind. Patting Prius on the shoulder he said, "This is... Miss Pasha. She used to be a well-renowned lady. Although she's been cursed by demons, which is why she looks the way she does now, deep in her heart she's still human. There's no need to be afraid."

"La... Lady?" Prius was startled and took a moment to come to himself.

"Exactly." The King sighed. "Come, walk with me and I'll tell you the details."

That's when Prius heard an unbelievable story. There were more

monsters like Pasha. 400 years ago, they lived in the Barbarian Land and even built their own towns, but they failed to resist the combined invasion of demonic beasts and demons. Most of them died in the wilderness, only very few escaped to the Western Region. The demons' curse turned them into monsters and made them immortal, which meant they had to live forever with that pain. Now, Roland took in those survivors. They would become Roland's ally for fighting against demons, as well as the subjects of Graycastle.

"I... understand," Prius murmured.

"But, as you can see, their looks can easily give people a negative first-impression, so I have to keep it top secret and only very few have been told." Roland stopped for a while, his eyesight freezing. "If you speak of this, you know the consequence."

"I'll keep my mouth shut, Your Majesty!" Prius hurriedly swore. Although this odd news was more inconceivable than the horror stories from grannies' mouths, he did not intend to dispute how much was truthful. He would believe whatever His Majesty told him. That was the fundamental conduct of a loyal official.

"Glad to hear that." His Majesty nodded.

With the blob monster... no, the ancient Lord Pasha as their guide, the party passed through a long aisle. She then turned back and said, "Here we are."

In front of Prius, there was another huge cave. The bleak underground space was suddenly full of movement. Despite the unprecedented plants and cavernous view, the huge worms crawling among the mushrooms alone were enough to keep his attention.

Prius found that much stimulation, over a short period of time, had desensitized him.

"Is this... what I need to raise?"

His Majesty seemed to have been observing Prius the entire time. Finally, he nodded with satisfaction before saying, "That's right. It's called a rubber worm. Its secretion is a widely used industrial material, which is as important as meat and eggs. The expedition team found it in the Great Snow Mountain and brought it back. Unfortunately, it could only live underground, which is why it has been left to the survivors from the Third Border City to take care of." At this point, Roland suddenly changed the subject. "I heard in order to feed the chickens and ducks, you raised earthworms?"

"Essentially... yes." After quite some time, Prius finally caught up with His Majesty's thought. "I can reduce the poultry's foraging area, which will subsequently enable them to grow faster."

"These worms are no different than earthworms, I don't mean the breeding method, but the nature of the two." Roland kicked a rubber worm resting on a mushroom. The worm didn't move until it hit the ground, then, dragging its huge belly, it crawled off into the thick grass. "They're not aggressive; their favorite food is mushrooms. They are massive, but they are passive, so you won't be bitten. The only thing you need to do is regularly collect the mucus in their bellies."

"Mu...cus?"

"Have you seen a milk cow? The point isn't the cow, but what the cow produces."

"By collect, do you mean, squeeze it out?"

"It'd be best if you could find a way to harvest it." Roland smiled gently, "However, like I just said, the worm itself isn't important. Sometimes it's faster to kill the worm to collect the mucus. Afterall, their reproductive speed is much faster than a chicken or a cow."

Prius suddenly shivered, for no clear reason he got the impression that His Majesty did not like the vital worms.

As this thought flashed through his mind, in the blink of an eye, Roland returned to his usual tone, "Written in this notebook are some of the habits of these worms." He handed Prius a booklet, with a cowhide hardcover. "You can read it for reference and compare it to your knowledge. Then see if you can find ways to make them grow faster and collect mucus easier. I wish to see what you accomplish by next month."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Prius swallowed hard and took the booklet, as he inquired, "How am I to do this on my own..."

"The First Army stationed here will assist you," Roland said with a smile. "Work hard and there will be a place for you in this year's Award and Honor Ceremony."

Chapter 844: Messages Arriving at the Same Time

The decision to have the Ministry of Agriculture farm rubber worms was not Roland's latest flight of fancy. In his opinion, farming rubber worms was as important as exploiting oil, so he naturally wanted to have that industry under his control. If it was not for the potential threats the worms might bring to people, he would not have any intention to place the feedlot in the Third Border City.

After discussing with Barov, Edith and other people, he decided to adopt the explanation of "her ladyship and the fallen city", which would be more acceptable to people than the saying of "the witch empire". As now, only the City Hall's senior officials and the main force of the First Army knew the truth of the Battle of Divine Will and Taquila, so it was very difficult to make the upcoming war known to the world. However, they worried about a blunt announcement would make people panic, so they had to rephrase their proclamation before unveiling the truth to the public. A good way to do so was to slowly send the reworded information out to minimize subsequent shock created among the public.

Roland would rather keep the dark history of the witch empire covered forever for the sake of the stability of the united front. If humans were fortunate to win the Battle of Divine Will, it would be easier to make them accept that unique period of history by the time archaeologists unearthed the lost record.

Knight Elk was left alone in the wormhole to do the research on his own, while Roland, invited by Pasha, entered the subterranean hall.

"They're back, Your Majesty."

"Who?" Confused by the random words, Roland could not help raising his eyebrow,

Pasha did not reply. She raised her tentacles and pointed at the deep, secluded passage on the other side of the hall, looking enigmatic.

He looked over his shoulder at the dark passage where there was a flash of white shadow swinging by. Moments later, two giant devouring worms crept out and crawled towards him, wriggling, their mouths wide open, revealing tusks and fangs.

"Your Majesty, do you remember us?"

One of them greeted Roland merrily.

Roland, slightly surprised, asked, "Are you Jasmine... and Lyra?"

How could Roland forget them? He could still remember the moment they had bade farewell and the calm look when they had said that they harbored no regrets before boarding the concrete boat heading to Great Snow Mountain. Even now, Roland could still feel their unfailing determination in their tones.

"Yes, we are. You do remember us!"

"Mind your manner!" Another worm poked her companion with its tail. "Whatever we looked like, do remember we are the Taquila..."

"Worm?" Jasmine finished the sentence for Lyra deliberately.

"Witch!" Lyra cried.

"They just arrived at Neverwinter. They persist in seeing you before their dormancy, so I have to keep them waiting beside the hall. I hope I didn't frighten you." Pasha drooped her main tentacles. "Thanks again for your assistance."

"No, you didn't frighten me. Honestly, I've been waiting for the good news of the successful transfer too." Roland waved one hand and did not take it seriously. "Why... do they have to go dormant?"

"For we couldn't afford to sustain the worm carrier, Your Majesty," Lyra said solemnly. "Fran alone is capable of handling

the daily tunneling and transportation. There's no need to keep all three carriers awake. Even Fran was dormant for the most of her time before coming here."

Roland remembered that Lyra had the same bright and bubbly personality as Jasmine's before her transfer. But now she gave him an impression of maturity as if she really grew up instantly after the Soul Transfer.

After staying with Phyllis and the other witches for a long time, Roland learned that not all Taquila witches had lived a long life. At the very beginning, due to the lack of carriers and God's Punishment Warriors' shells, they were forced to either to merge with Eleanor, one of the Three Chiefs, or to be transferred to a soul container and enter a state of dormancy.

In other words, only a few witches had lived for centuries. Most witches waited for a long time until the church was established in the Starfall City that could provide shells for them. Phyllis had changed two shells so far and had stayed awake for merely 150 years. The actual time when she was conscious was indeed shorter as there was a period of time at the very beginning when she felt bewildered and had to adjust herself to the new environment. Still, she was regarded as "the elder" among the Taquila survivors.

Jasmine and Lyra were among the youngest transferer. Apart from the time they spent in getting familiar with their shells, they were often asleep. So, their mental age was close to their real age. Roland was really impressed with the change in their mentality.

Moreover, the most estimable thing was that they still kept their spirits up even in the shells of devouring worms, which, as far as Roland could see, exceeded many people.

Now it seemed that there was a good reason for the Union to unify the continent. Apart from its absolute power, they had many other merits worth noting as well.

"If I intend to turn the Impassable Mountain Range into a

defensive barrier, three worm carriers aren't a lot," Roland said while looking at Pasha. "Keep them awake. They'll be very helpful to the upcoming new project. In addition, there're also many places in Neverwinter that need reconstruction. No need to worry about food. The City Hall will take care of it."

"Really?" Jasmine yelled excitedly.

No one liked to spend most of their time sleeping, especially the Taquila witches. They had slept too long.

"As long as you don't ask for meat for every meal." Roland spread out his hands. "If they have Fran's stomach, I estimate they would just need the same amount of food as those for 100 people."

"Now that you've got a plan, I will leave them to you." Pasha, who seemed to have already known the answer, said with a smile.

...

Roland felt more relaxed after the encounter with Jasmine and Lyra. As he returned to the castle, he received a message from the First Army.

They had successfully accomplished the task to blow up the snow mountain. The passage that connected the underground river and the sea had been blocked completely by the explosion, and the rising water would head to the west after the ruins submerged. Most of the men would return to Neverwinter shortly except the Gun Battalion, who would stay at the snow mountain and monitor the change of the watercourse.

Things had turned out as Roland had expected. As the Taquila witches finished searching the underground ruins and gained the devouring worms, their exploration was approaching an end.

Thus, there was nothing Roland needed to worry about as far as the Western Region was concerned for the time being.

When Roland unsealed the other letter, the content surprised him.

It was from the Northern Region, not sent by a carrier pigeon but by a rider under Duke Kant's order entrusted by the garrison. With full four pages, it detailed what had happened in the Holy City of Hermes and the collapse of the Tower of Babel. Eagle Face, the commander of the garrison believed it was the perfect time to launch an attack. After taking the thick wall around the city and the huge mangonel into account, he asked for an reinforcement from one or two cannon teams. He wished to gain the first victory in the new year for his King.

After Roland finished reading the letter, he could not believe that the church jointly built by the Union and Starfall City had come to its end like this.

Roland could not help wondering whether this information was true or false.

Doubtlessly, the church still had a number of God's Punishment soldiers, and it might make a desperate attempt to save itself by involving the First Army in a street battle. Roland had planned to let the God's Punishment Witches participate in the battle to provide close-range attacks that the First Army was in lack of. In the meantime, the new mortar would be put into use as well to further drive enemies into a corner. Although it was advertised that the goal of the war was to unify the whole kingdom, the real purpose was actually to exterminate the church.

But now came the signs that the Holy City was fraying at the edges from inside.

Just as he was about to summon people to have a discussion, he heard a tapping sound from the French window behind him.

He turned around and saw Nightingale pull the bird directly through the glass into the room.

Roland took the letter off the carrier pigeon's leg. The bird was apparently at a loss. When he spread the letter out and glanced at the content, he immediately stood up.

"How dare he?"

There was only one sentence on the paper.

"Appen, the King of Dawn, schemes to disturb the Eastern Region of Graycastle. The situation in the Holy City is volatile. Otto Luoxi has been imprisoned."

Chapter 845: Eye of the Branch Nest

"It hurts!"

"It hurts a lot!"

"I can't bear it!"

The monster beat its tentacles against the seawater in vexation. The "blade" and "foot" hiding inside its body were shivering, apparently frightened by the overwhelming anger.

For the monster, pains were not unfamiliar.

From the moment of its birth to the life as an Eye of Sectional Nest, the monster had fought numerous battles against enemies. All that it had experienced—injuries, annexations, evolutions, and pains—enhanced and sharpened its senses. They were necessary sacrifices for absorbing magic power.

But it was not the pain that annoyed the monster. It was... a feeling that the monster had never had before.

The monster tried to match the emotion with other reactions of life but soon found it unnecessary—the feeling lay in the instincts of most species. No matter how considerably the species varied, they all had, without an exception, this kind of feeling.

Fear.

A kind of feeling the monster had experienced for the first time of its life.

The feeling somehow bewildered the monster, and the anger rose before it noticed it.

"kill!"

"Kill her!"

"How very much I want to kill her!"

"How dare her, a tiny bug, to break into my body and challenge

me with the speck of magic power? One day I'll tear her to pieces and put her head on her skeleton, in a way red mist worms have done."

Yet, neither anger nor fear was a necessary emotion that the monster had to experience in order to grow up. The monster had never been scared of pain, nor had it been upset by a momentary defeat. To be honest, it had never thought of such kind of thing before.

The monster had thought of nothing except the evolution.

Evolution was more important than mere survival, for the former represented the sublimation of the species, whereas the latter only stood for the interest of individuals.

The monster realized that there was something wrong with its body.

But what was it?

Even thinking about the question gave it a serious headache. The hot flames had not only taken away one-third of its body but also made its head swimming.

"I need time."

"Time to regenerate a new body."

"And time to find the answer."

The monster suppressed the fear, anger, and all sorts of various subtle feelings that it had never experienced before and sank to the bottom of the ocean.

...

Over 10 days later, the monster crept out of the hiding place and released all the "blades" and "feet" locked within its body.

The monster had suffered great losses in the battle, but it did not care much, for as long as it recovered completely, it would regenerate new parts of its body.

Now the food was more urgent for the hungry monster.

Meanwhile, it had come up with some conclusions to the problems.

Firstly, the monster found that it had lost many pheromones that it had taken from various types of bugs before. The pheromones could help to indicate the evolution direction of its group, so collecting them was the chief task for every eye of the branch nest. The monster's loss was understandable—with a huge blast, the monster lost the control of its body in the hot flames and heat waves, its body parts twisted and broken, and among them, some were the brains that stored pheromones. Even though most parts of its body were healed, the pheromones in these brains were gone. This was like when you popped water bags. Repairing them would not help with the matter.

"That's not a big deal. There're bugs everywhere for me to recollect."

"And I've succeeded in keeping the most important red mist multi-eyed worm, so the loss is acceptable."

"But the problem is I've lost the connection with the mother of the nest."

"I can't believe it!"

Since the monster was born, its connection with its own kind was so close and inextricable that as long as they were in the same water area, it could always sense the central nest, no matter how far distance was laid between them. Through the water waves, it could deliver the collected pheromones, as well as share the evolution instructions among its kind.

But now all of them were gone.

The monster had scarcely concerned about this kind of problem since it got wounded. By the time its mind was clear enough to smoothly deliver the pheromone of the multi-eyed worm, it

suddenly realized that where the indescribable feeling came from.

It could not catch the voice of the central nest even when the tide fell and waters became one.

At first, the monster wonder if the problem lay in its incomplete regenerated body. Then it thought of the fact that any individuals separated from the central nest would never lose the connection as long as they were not utterly dead. The monster checked its body over and over again and finally noticed a part of its brain had blended with the red mist multi-eyed worm, rather than engulfed it

"That tiny worm must have taken advantage of my fragile moment and had a desperate struggle."

Aware of the truth, the monster was scared and angry at first but soon calmed down.

In its eyes, a less evolved worm was merely a lower creature, nothing more.

The worm did not benefit much from its behavior even though it indeed made some difference.

Now the monster could not sense even a little bit of the multi-eyed worm inside its body. Instead, it had taken over all its queer eyes, through which the monster could "see" many primal creatures looking at it.

After a long thought, the monster finally found the answer to its problem.

The reason why it could not reach the central nest lay in the merging, which involuntarily made it have some of the weird feelings of the worm.

For example, fear.

And anger.

And... egoism.

Under the circumstances, the monster should have returned to Zenith Sea first and informed Mother of the Nest what had happened here. After that, it should hand itself over to the Mother of the Nest, for when the message could not be passed through water waves, annexation would be a perfect way for the group to retain all the pheromones and thereby obtain useful evolutionary instructions.

Of course, the monster knew that evolution was more important than survival, a very basic understanding among the whole group.

But now it hesitated.

The monster found that it had pondered over more things in recent 10-odd days than what it had done in the past 100 years altogether. Back then, fighting, annexing, collecting, and growing were like its instincts, yet now it seemed to lose such instincts...

In addition, the monster was aware that the restrictions on using pheromones were lifted.

Every step of evolution was a choice made out of an abundance of caution. The pheromones collected by every nest eye must be passed to the central nest, where it would analyze them and then sort out the valuable parts that would be reconstructed and turned into evolution instructions. Evolution did not only involve the change in nest eyes but also involved every part of the group, from the central nest to "blade" and "foot". All of them grew up in this way little by little.

Therefore, there were not many differences between each eye of the branch nest.

But during the time of recovery, the monster had accidentally used a pheromone coming from a primal creature with a self-healing ability. That was why its serious wound, which would have taken months to heal up, faded away so quickly within merely a dozen days. The monster also noticed something unusual about itself.

It was no longer a usual nest eye.

Its "foot" quickly hauled plenty of food—the primal aquatic creatures nearby, or what worms normally referred to as fish. The "blade" neatly cut off their heads, which then gave off a fishy smell that would soon attract more fish. In this way, it would not be long before the monster filled itself up.

The monster did not know why those primal aquatic creatures, which enjoyed the same resource as them, still lived as the weakest among all. Somehow, as the monster watched the foolish fish gathered, it thought of itself.

Since the monster had developed an emotion called "fear", it no longer wanted to go back to Zenith Sea. The red mist worm's feeling had influenced the monster. It now realized that survival was more important than anything.

The monster was afraid of being swallowed up by Mother of the Nest and being disturbed again by the erratic little bug.

It also wanted a revenge. The anger was still there, but it hid it temporarily.

As the monster continuously felt both anger and fear, it found itself yearn for more. This was something it had never considered before.

Evolution would be the only way to get what it wanted.

The monster hastily engulfs a pack of fish and then started to take action.

The monster had never been so impatient before. Back then, every nest eye did the same job, and it did not matter whether the monster was quick or slow.

But things had changed now.

The pheromones the monster was going to collect and the evolution it would make had nothing to do with the group.

This time, those tasks would be done for its own sake.

Chapter 846: Factional Conflicts

"Otto Luoxi is our ally and he deserves better. They've harassed the Eastern Region this time, next time they may dare to cross the boundary and invade the kingdom!" Brian said loudly. "Your Majesty, please give the order! No matter how far the enemy is, the First Army will crush them for you!"

"Invading us?" Barov raised his eyebrow. "If the army of the Kingdom of Dawn could enter Graycastle so brazenly, why on earth would you be here?"

"My lord, it's just an example—"

"A baseless example won't convince anybody," Barov interrupted. "More importantly, why do we need to involve the army in a problem that could be solved by diplomacy? Do you remember His Majesty's primary goal for this year? Do you think the eldest son of a noble family from the City of Glow would be more significant than our king's enthronement?"

For a moment, Brian was speechless.

"Alright... let's take a break." Roland clapped his hands. "Eat something before we continue."

As the clapping sounded, a servant waiting at the doorway entered wheeling a trolley. Some officials in the hall started to help themselves to snacks while others went to the bathroom. Thus, the tension within the room subsided.

This scene had come up repeatedly in their discussions during the three-day meeting. After Roland had received the intelligence reports from the spy, Hill Fawkes, and the garrison in the Northern Region, he had summoned all of the relevant officials to the castle to plan out a solution to the current situation.

Roland could clearly see two different factions forming among his men. The City Hall faction, headed by Barov, was more

conservative. They preferred to concentrate on the development of the kingdom and were more focused on the Western Region, and they planned to gradually expand the population and increase the strength of Graycastle until the unification of the kingdom. To make the King of Dawn, Appen Moya, pay the price for his action was in their plan, but it was not considered urgent.

The other faction consisting of the First Army under the leadership of Brian, favored by the Adviser Department, was more aggressive. But they were not as united and as close as the City Hall faction. The men of the First Army were influenced by Brian, who boasted of new concepts like "defending against the enemy abroad", "acting before the enemy even notices," and "striking the enemy unprepared", so they insisted on taking immediate action, delivering retribution upon the Kingdom of Dawn and saving the detained Otto Luoxi. As for the members of the Adviser Department, they probably chose to stand with the First Army for their own benefit as they had no way to earn themselves rewards unless there was a war to fight.

Additionally, some members of the Adviser Department were from Longsong Stronghold, so they were not as familiar with Neverwinter as the men of City Hall. More often than not, their ideas were refuted and unappreciated, making their voice seem even less important.

Hence, there were several times that Brian's speech was countered by Barov easily. Honestly, in terms of eloquence, Brian was far behind Barov, so he had already done a great job of expressing his ideas in front of the ministers in the meeting so far. After all, Brian, the leader of the Gun Battalion, was young. He grew up as an ordinary villager of Border Town, less tested and inexperienced, which was something that could be seen from his report of the defensive battle in the snow mountain.

Roland had kept silent during the discussions. For the moment, the aggressive side was at a disadvantage and was losing control of

the debate. To Roland's surprise, Barov's ability had grown greatly in the past three years. He might have been well trained while serving the previous Treasurer and all he needed was a chance to take off.

The only thing that surprised Roland was that Edith had made no speech and kept silent over the three days of the meeting.

Among the officials, she, the Pearl of the Northern Region, might be the only one qualified to argue with Barov.

To prevent internal conflict between Edith and Barov, who both liked to compete against each other, Roland had deliberately set up a new department in City Hall, the Ministry of Defense, specializing in external military affairs. This new department included the Adviser Department as one of its subordinate organizations. The Ministry of Defense would be responsible for the external military affairs and the Security Bureau. In this way, the framework of Graycastle's brute strength was roughly finalized.

As expected, Roland was the minister of this new department, just like he was for the other departments. Edith used to be Barov's assistant, learning to deal with affairs in the City Hall. She had done her job very well, but it was not until now that she got her formal approval and became a member of the new department. To be given a such an honor so easily would be so great that no other reward would be a match in the future and other newcomers would take her as an example, believing that they were also qualified to get such a title easily.

After all, times had changed. Roland was no longer in a shortage of people and would not appoint anyone of little competence to a major position again.

So, Edith now worked as a clerk in the Ministry of Defense, playing the role of an adviser to serve Roland.

Roland believed that a person like the Pearl of the Northern

Region would never feel frustrated at such an arrangement which could give an impression that she had to start all over again to gain power and that she would surely understand his intentions. Although she left the chief's office, she earned a chance to be promoted without interference. So, it was very unusual for her to keep quiet on an occasion that fit her skills and interests, and let Barov control the topic.

...

Roland glanced at Edith, who looked relaxed as she enjoyed her Chaos Drink. It was as if Barov's imposing manner held no interest to her.

"What a strange woman," he thought to himself.

He shrugged and said to Scroll beside him, "Show me today's meeting records."

"Okay," Scroll said as she put down the quill and handed a notebook over. "Here's all the records."

After three days of discussion, they had come up with a mutual conclusion to the information Roland had received.

Hill Fawkes, who had sent back the secret messages, had placed the three pieces of news in order according to their importance. That meant the enemy harassing the Eastern Region required the most concern and the thing about Otto in custody was less important. Given that, the meeting members believed that the eldest son of Luoxi Family was not, for the moment, in mortal danger. Appen Moya, who was new to his throne, still needed the support of the three big families.

Even though Appen Moya wanted to replace the Luoxi Family, he needed time, and they thought he would need at least a year or two. Otto might suffer in the prison, but he would survive.

The news Roland got about the volatile situation in the Holy City was confirmed by the report from the garrison in the Northern

Region, so the meeting members thought it must have been true. Now even the City of Glow started to stir, they thought that Moya family might also be aiming at the church. The Moya hated the church, and they were eager for the large amount of wealth in Hermes that the church had collected and saved for centuries.

As for the harassment, the meeting members thought it might refer to secretly provoking and supporting the rebels. Other than that, the things the enemy could do, that was practical, was very little. No one believed that Appen would dare to march his army upon Graycastle, for defeat was nearly guaranteed. But the rebellion truly happened within the domain of Graycastle, which meant it could not be ignored. No matter how weak the rebels were, their action would cause damage to the kingdom, so it was reasonable for Hill to regard this piece of news as the most important.

Chapter 847: Now Is the Time

Both factions agreed to recover the Eastern Region and destroy the church, which had been incorporated into the plan in the previous meetings.

The only thing still in dispute was when to retaliate against the Kingdom of Dawn.

Roland had made his diplomatic posture very clear to his men, so this time no one tried to compromise on this matter or sweep the problem under the rug. But the officials of the City Hall still wished to negotiate with the Dawn Crown after Roland's enthronement, for they believed that at that time King Roland would be more rightful to stand out for Greycastle, and meanwhile they kept the choice of using force when it was needed. Apparently, they had been persuaded and tempted by the meeting held in the Months of Demons aiming at the future, so they were so eager to support Prince Roland to take the throne officially and become the veritable King of Graycastle. They also wanted to ascend from the local officials to the ministers of a real kingdom.

Lots of men and resources would be required to invade deep into the Kingdom of Dawn, which would doubtlessly affect the enthronement. No king would send out his elite men and hastily hold the ceremony of coronation at the same time. That was disgraceful either to the king or his people.

Of course, it was Roland who had the final say.

In the past three days, he had been watching the discussion without showing any obvious preference which was a sharp contrast to the unyielding attitude he had shown in the letter he had sent to Appen. But thanks to his silence, the attendants finally got a chance to have as many arguments as they wanted.

Roland did not change his original intention but was biding his time.

He was waiting for an opportunity to profit the most while paying the smallest price.

By nightfall, there came someone who knocked on Roland's door.

He let out a slight sigh of relief as he saw the visitor was Andrea.

Finally, she came.

Had she not taken the initiative, Roland would have gone to visit her sooner or later though he was sure that it was not a good choice and he might not be able to achieve anything by doing so.

"Here, have a dried fish," Nightingale said as she showed up and gave a piece of honey fish to Andrea, who might be the only witch who could get a share of snacks from Nightingale with the exception of Wendy.

Was it because of the bond among nobles?

"Thank you," Andrea, who did not seem in the mood for snacks, said as she took the snack and pocketed it. She put her hand on her chest and saluted Roland, "Your Majesty, I..."

She paused, finding the words.

"You want me to save your childhood friend, Otto Luoxi, don't you?" Roland spoke out Andrea's thoughts. He could not allow Andrea to hesitate any longer. If she changed her mind, the three days Roland had spent waiting would be in vain.

Roland also roughly guessed why Andrea could not make up her mind. He was certain that Otto was the one who fell in love with Andrea, who, on the contrary, only just took him as her friend. That was why she did not know how to make her request. To save Otto because he was her childhood playmate? After so many years, Andrea no longer missed her life in the Kingdom of Dawn because of what her father, Earl Quinn, had done to her. Her father did not protect her after he knew she was a witch. Instead, he used an accident to create a fake death for her. Of course, that was not something pleasant to remember.

When Otto visited Neverwinter last winter, Andrea had clearly made known her attitude that she wished not to be involved in her life in the Kingdom of Dawn. She now came to Roland just because of her kindness and her wish to offer some help.

"Yes..." She drew a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"But as you've heard in the meeting. At least over 3,000 men are needed to make Appen yield plus the men that were required to attack the Holy City. The total number will reach about 5,000, which accounts for 80 percent of the First Army."

Regardless of the argument, the City Hall and Adviser Departments finalized a rough plan. There was no river connecting Graycastle and the other two pieces of land, Hermes Plateau and the Kingdom of Dawn. Under such circumstances, they had to rely on carts and men to transport supplies which significantly increased the number of the men engaged in the logistics team. In addition, 20 percent of the First Army must be left to garrison every region of the kingdom so they had to leave for the next battlefield right after they won the first battle. The First Army did not even have extra men to take care of the land they had just conquered. By taking every aspect into account, it turned out that they would be busy all around without making a profit or even worse.

"I just counted the manpower. If you put in the materials... all kinds of cost, like the money for horses, carts, food..." Watching Andrea becoming more embarrassed, Roland attempted to illustrate more facts to make her suffer, but all of a sudden, he paused.

"Your Majesty?" The blonde witch in front of him was slightly surprised.

Roland's abrupt stop was not because he noticed something wrong, but because Nightingale had pinched him hard on his back and then whispered to him in a voice that no one else could hear,

"Stop pushing her. Can't you just say what you mean."

"Ahem... I'm alright." Roland coughed. "That's the situation now, but we can turn the tables with some effort. It just depends on the three families and to what extent, they are willing to cooperate."

"The three... families?"

"It's obvious that the new king no longer trusts them. Our action may succeed in saving Otto, but our direct interference will break the relationship between the Moya royalties and Luoxi Family. Even if Appen is overthrown, how could the next king forget this?" Roland touched his chin and went on, "Now I've got strong demons to fight against, so I can't put too much concentration and men into our neighbor country. The future of the Kingdom of Dawn depends on the three families."

Andrea seemed to realize something. She said, "Please go on."

"We need someone to replace the Moya royalty," Roland said word by word.

Andrea was quiet for a moment, and then she said, "I see. Do you have a plan?"

She was a true highborn girl, who could keep calm even in the face of scheming to overthrow a regime. That made the next talk so much easier. Roland went straight to the point and asked, "Are you interested in being the Queen of the Kingdom of Dawn?"

"Your Majesty?" Andrea's face finally changed. The question indeed took her by surprise, "No... I don't want to leave..."

"Why not?"

She bit her lip and said, "No reason...I'm just not interested."

That was something Roland had not expected, not her answer of not wanting to be the Queen of Dawn, but her expression. She was clearly swayed by the considerations of gain and loss, which was something rarely seen with Andrea, whose manner was usually so

elegant.

Was there something more precious to her than being a queen?

Roland sipped his tea, his face emotionless. Luckily, he had a second plan.

"How about your father? Is he interested? Will he stand out?"

The Quinn Family was his best choice. In addition to its superior strength among the three families, Andrea, who was loved by Otto and Oro, also played a key role. To some extent, she could speak for the three families.

The people that graduated from Neverwinter's current education system were not enough to run Graycastle, so there was no way for Roland to put men in place to fully control the Kingdom of Dawn. It would be easier to support a regime that was friendly to Graycastle and if Andrea gave her approval of the plan, he would be able to get the neighbor's resources at a low price.

"Of course, the other two families will also benefit. In fact, the coup will make every participant win, and more than that, the threat that hangs over your heads will be completely lifted," Roland said slowly. "In this way, Neverwinter will save the trouble of marching army and investing coins, and all I need to do was to assist the Quinn Family in taking the throne."

Andrea did not hesitate for long this time. After a moment of thought, she gave her promise. "I think... my father will agree."

She paused and corrected herself, "No, he'll definitely agree."

When Andrea gave those words, Roland knew that she had fully understood what he meant.

Now was the time.

"Neverwinter will soon take action. Don't worry... Otto Luoxi won't be detained for too long."

Chapter 848: Mission Pure Witch

"I'd thought you wanted to be the King of Dawn yourself." Nightingale twisted her lips and spoke after Andrea had departed. "Turns out you weren't joking about making her the monarch."

"I knew you would figure it out soon." Roland shrugged. "As for myself..." Several explanations had run through his head, including the lack of able personnel, Andrea's communicative abilities, as well as the constraints on time and resource. Instead, he settled for a simple line. "I'm just not capable enough."

"Really..." Nightingale patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sure you can count on Andrea. You can't go wrong with the Quinn family."

"These two certainly appreciate each other a lot." Roland began to laugh within. However, as Nightingale had been a dependant of a family in the past, her political foresight was a level below his own. He personally believed that family background was not a factor, as long as Andrea was not blindly devoted to it. He was certain that she, like most people, would gladly accept and cherish a glorious opportunity like this which did not come at much cost.

But he kept these thoughts to himself, for it was much too adorable to see Nightingale speak nonsense in the most serious of manners.

Just at this moment, someone knocked on the office door.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, and the person standing outside turned out to be Isabella.

Roland had not expected this. The latter was not a member of the Witch Union and hence could not access the Castle District under normal circumstances. However, once he saw Agatha's figure behind her, he understood how she was able to get through.

"Your Majesty." The Pure Witch, formerly of the Church, bowed

and quickly got to the point. "I've heard from Agatha that the Church of Hermes is on the brink of collapse, is that so?"

If it was not for the mildly grim look on her face, Roland might even have mistaken that she was here to plead on behalf of her former overseers.

"That's what the intelligence says, but we're still finding out the specific details." Roland was puzzled as to why the Ice Witch had revealed this information to the latter, but instead of denying the matter outright, he replied as vaguely as he could. "Refugees from the Church have begun to appear in Coldwind Ridge and the western part of Kingdom of Dawn. They've testified that the most popular cathedral in the Holy City has collapsed overnight."

"Your Majesty, I hope that you can send troops to Hermes as quickly as possible."

"Why?"

"Don't you remember what I'd mentioned? The millions of Berserk Pills there." Isabella replied in a disgruntled voice. "There's bound to be some people who now know where they're stored... if word gets out, your plans will be disrupted." She paused before continuing, "This stuff will be highly useful for the Battle of Divine Will. Best if you can collect and transport all of it back to Neverwinter."

It was only now that Roland remembered the latter had mentioned this in the intelligence she had provided. It seemed that Zero's plan was to unite all of Mankind in a life-and-death battle against the Army of Demons, and her trump card was indeed to be these Berserk Pills. As he was personally contemptuous of these drugs, he had almost forgotten about the matter.

However, the situation had changed greatly. Isabella was right; if someone distributed the pills, such that they fell into the hands of nobles from Graycastle, the Kingdom of Dawn, or worse, the rats of Black Street, there would be considerable trouble. Perhaps, they

would still not be able to take on a fully-equipped army, but individual officials and regional governments would certainly be under threat.

"Where are the pills stored?" He glanced at Isabella.

"They're separately stored in hidden warehouses all over the Hermes Plateau. It's hard to explain where they are exactly." The latter hesitated for a moment before she continued, "If Your Majesty trusts me, allow me to follow the army there. I was once the Pope's ordained executor, and with this identity, I may be able to slow down the internal collapse. Otherwise, the army will find it difficult to stem the flow of refugees."

"But who'll know if you use your identity to do other things?" Nightingale interjected. "Perhaps you'll secretly release those believers... you have friends among them, haven't you?"

"I wouldn't lie to His Majesty," Isabella refuted. "Zero has already shown up who's the real God's pet. I've no need to do such useless things. If necessary, the army can lay a trap for me to lead the believers into and kill them off. That's another way of maintaining order, aside from making use of my identity, as I mentioned."

"Ugh..." Nightingale rasped and spat out a mouthful. "I guess that's something a Pure Witch would think of."

Roland felt somewhat disconcerted. It was not often that Nightingale would be at a loss for words, which was a sign that the latter was being serious about her suggestion. Though she had committed her full allegiance to him the other day, this was done on the basis of fighting the demons. Unlike most other witches, she had been educated and trained as a Pure Witch, which meant she had long been taught that the lives of normal people were unimportant as long as she could accomplish her objectives.

After pondering for a short while, Roland slowly opened his mouth and spoke. "I'll allow you to travel with the First Army, but you shan't intervene in any battle. All you have to do is to find the

pills and destroy them on the spot."

"Your Majesty." Her brows visibly furrowed. "These drugs may overwork the body, but when it comes to a life-and-death battle..."

"Say no more." Roland cut her short. "And speaking of maintaining order, I've another task for you."

Isabella immediately lowered her head and responded, "As Your Majesty commands."

"There should still be a few cloisters left in the old Holy City, right?"

"Yes, but there are no witches left." After some contemplation, she amended her words. "Perhaps a few Awakened Witches may have appeared during the last Months of Demons, but there's only a slim chance that they're still alive."

"That doesn't matter. Free the orphans, take care of them, and bring them back to Western Region."

Isabella was taken aback. "All of them?"

"Yes. You shall be in charge." Roland nodded.

Supposing that Pure Witches truly disregarded the lives of others in order to complete their missions, Roland wanted to see what Isabella would do when her task was to save lives. Though he might not be able to change what she had done in the past, he hoped that she would be able to rectify her ways.

"This task has its purpose, which I must thank you very much for reminding me about. That is, if the upper hierarchy loses the ability to maintain order, the cloisters are likely to turn into living hells. Right now, Neverwinter requires a large amount of labor, and there'll also be jobs for women. I'd heard that the church had started basic education for the orphans, no? I'm sure they're all of excellent potential, and shouldn't be left to starve to death behind those high walls. I want you to bring all of them here without exception."

Isabella remained silent for a long while before she noted, "That'll require a lot of food."

"I'll have people to prepare all the food that's required."

An intricate expression appeared in her eyes. Roland had seen it before on the day she was pardoned, her chains were removed, and she was granted "limited freedom" status.

If her thoughts could be heard, they would certainly comprise of a loud "Why?".

She slowly bent her waist and bowed.

"As Your Majesty commands."

Chapter 849: The King's Orders

When Edith returned to her abode, she took off her coat and casually tossed it on the hanger at the door.

She could not help taking in a deep breath of the rich fragrance which pervaded from the living room, and her dry mouth welled up with saliva at once.

She had not felt any hungry during the meeting at the Ministry of Defense, but she now realized that her stomach was growling terribly.

"Why so late today?" Cole's voice was heard before he stuck his head out from behind a doorframe, visibly holding a spoon in his hand.

"The war will start anytime now, and naturally, the Ministry of Defense has more work to do. In particular, the circumstances of the Kingdom of Dawn are making things more complicated." She took off her leather boots and replaced them with a soft pair of socks before she entered the living room. "If I return late next time, you should go ahead with dinner."

"Nah, I'm fine with this." Cole twitched his lips. "But, isn't it that His Majesty has yet to decide what to do regarding the King of Dawn? If he employs the strategy offered by Barov's side, won't the plans you're making now be a complete waste?"

"Do you really think he doesn't have his own ideas?" Edith patted her younger brother on the head as she walked past him. "Roland Wimbledon isn't the sort of king who blindly goes by his subordinates' ideas."

"What've you found out this time?" Cole put on a curious look.

"I can tell you, but then I may have to kill you." She swept a glance at him which caused him to quiver and not speak another word.

On the dining table were placed two dishes and a soup, all of which the main ingredient was Neverwinter's specialty - Bird Beak Mushrooms. Recently, either because there was a growing number of hunters who gathered these mushrooms, or because a new source had been discovered, a large supply of mushrooms which were exceptionally fresh, delicious and juicy was being sold in the Convenience Market, and at a lower price than before. As such, the sale of these mushrooms was on the verge of surpassing that of meat products.

It was a pity that the plump feature of the mushrooms was difficult to preserve for long, or otherwise they would sell excellently outside of the Western Region as well.

Edith placed a grilled mushroom in her mouth. The slightly burnt flavor of the mushroom cap blended together perfectly with the melted butter, and after a satisfying crisp sound, she felt her entire mouth filled with mushroom juice, causing her to croon in delight.

She realized she had belittled her dear younger brother all this time.

Although he was not good with the sword and possessed an indecisive character, his talent for learning was far greater than what she had expected. Take cooking for instance - he had learned how to prepare these mushrooms simply by eating them once or twice at banquets organized by His Majesty, yet the taste was almost identical. This would not be possible without an ingenious mind. It also applied to his clerical work at the City Hall. He had been on the job for merely a few months, but had already served as the official scribe at important meetings held at the Lord's castle. This speed of promotion far exceeded that of people of the same age group as him. Even the bunch of young nobles from the Northern Region, who considered themselves to be peerless in their excellence, might not have been able to do better than him.

Of course, what Edith appreciated most was that he always

listened to and obeyed what she said.

As she thought about this, she felt the dinner taste more delicious than ever.

After all, the greater the ability of the people under her charge, the easier it would be for her to get certain things done.

"Sis..." Halfway through the meal, Cole could not resist speaking up once again. "Why have you stayed silent for the past few meetings?"

"Uh?" She placed her spoon down and visibly raised her eyebrows.

"The questions which His Majesty asked were all within the realm of your expertise, no? Since you were able to read his intentions, why didn't you speak up for him?" Cole groused. "Did you not see the way Barov was looking at you... he was nearly bursting with delight."

"This is also a secret. According to conventional practice..."

"Ugh..." He lowered his head and revealed a distressed look. After much hesitation, he shook his head abjectly as if to suppress his inner curiosity.

"But, on account of this delicious dinner, I'll take it that you've paid up." Edith began to smile slightly. "How much do you know about Andrea of the Witch Union?"

"Andrea?" Cole thought for a short while. "Her name has never appeared on any scheduled plan, and her ability is meh..."

"Her ability is irrelevant." The Pearl of the Northern Region snapped. "It's normal that you don't know much about her. She's a combat witch, and rarely shows up in public. Only a few people know of her background. From what I've gathered, she's a noble from the Kingdom of Dawn, and her family's a highly honorable one. She's also an old friend of Otto Luoxi. You can more or less infer the rest of the secret from these details." Subsequently, she

provided a simple outline of her own speculation. "Do you now understand why I didn't speak up during the meetings? Had I revealed the favoritism involved, some things that could be achieved would no longer be possible. His Majesty might even have held me responsible!"

Cole's eyes widened. "How did you know all this?"

"Did you really believe I offered to go to the Great Snow Mountain simply to back up what I'd said, that 'only people who've served on the front line should be eligible to become key officials?' That's only one of several reasons." She shrugged her shoulders and continued, "Had I not made this trip, it would be difficult to make close contact with the witches."

Cole strained his brows and contemplated for a long while. "No, that's not right... granted that the news you'd heard was accurate, how could you be so certain that His Majesty would choose Andrea as a quick fix for the problems in the Kingdom of Dawn? There's absolutely no relation between these points! Couldn't he have made it a priority to recapture the kingdom and organize an ascension ceremony?"

"There's certainly no necessary relation. However, His Majesty's behavior during the meetings makes it hard for me to believe otherwise..." Edith responded assertively. "During three days of meetings, he'd glanced at Andrea a total of 17 times. She's neither a City Hall official, nor a key decision-maker, and as such, unless they're having an affair, this should be the secret plot."

"You... even noted this?"

She raised her bowl of soup and reenacted her posture during the meetings. "By sitting like this, I can observe His Majesty with the corners of my eyes. He certainly wouldn't expect that while he was watching Andrea, someone else was constantly observing him."

"..."The younger brother puckered his lips into a peculiar expression and muttered something inaudible.

"What did you say?" Edith questioned icily.

"No, erm... nothing much." Cole hastily waved his hands in denial. "But I would like to ask - when you spoke to Andrea after one of the meetings, was it also because of this? What if your guess was wrong?"

"Oh?" She arched an eyebrow in amusement. "You saw that?"

"I wanted to ask you what time you would return home that day. But... you seemed to remain in front of her for only a very short while..."

"I didn't need to divulge all of the conjectures in my head. Because it's a matter of favoritism, all I had to do was to give her a gentle nudge on the back," Edith calmly replied. "I simply said to her, 'His Majesty is a very benevolent king, and besides, he has met Sir Otto briefly before. As long as you speak up, he'll almost certainly agree to save the latter.' This way, if my guess was correct, I would have served to help His Majesty, while if I was wrong...", she paused briefly before finishing her sentence, "Who actually cares if the Kingdom of Dawn's nobles are dead or alive?"

...

The next day, the routine meeting lasted for only half its usual duration.

Roland Wimbledon, who had been quiet for the past three days, figured that he had heard enough of the ministers' discussion, and therefore announced his decision at the start of the meeting - in Neverwinter, the First Army would split up into two routes; the first route would be to enter Hermes Plateau through Coldwind Ridge, while the second would be to cut through the Eastern Region directly towards the border of the Kingdom of Dawn. The aim was for these two offensives to link up in the City of Glow by early autumn.

After Roland had issued his decree, everyone at the meeting

discontinued their arguments and acknowledged his orders in unison. Even Barov, who was the leader of a group which held a more conservative opinion, bowed in agreement as though he had not said what he did previously.

The entire Western Region became busy in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 850: A Lone Wolf

"One, two, three, four..."

Lorgar dumped the gold royals out from her bag on the table and carefully counted them twice, her brows tightly knitted together.

There were only 21 of them.

In less than half a month, she had used up three-quarter of her savings. She was certain that if she continued to live this way, she would have to flee back to her home in disgrace, dumping all her pride and lofty aspirations into quicksand.

The prices in a big city are so high, particularly in Evelyn's Complex Wine House!

The drinks are outrageously expensive. It's like an open robbery.

"No..." Lorgar whimpered as she lowered her head in dejection, her ears dropping as well. She had to admit that the wine shop had never robbed her and she had willingly taken out her gold royals to buy the drinks. In fact, the shop owner had even expressed worries for her many times when she had spent lots of money there. The owner had also told her that after joining the Witch Union, she would have been able to get one bottle for free each month. However, what the owner said failed to register in her brain.

I was defeated by my own desire.

Or by my curiosity.

But...

It's not my fault. Those Chaos Drinks are so enchanting. Even the morning dew of Arturo Oasis doesn't taste that good. Their amazing flavors are beyond description and each one of the colorful drinks is unique and tasty. Complex Wine House does deserve its reputation.

If all the wine house' drinks had the same flavor, even if they

were as tasty as the Three Gods' brew, Lorgar was confident that she could control herself. After all, she knew that drinking a proper amount of wine would do good to a warrior, but drinking too much would be destructive. However, Chaos Drinks were too unpredictable. She just couldn't wait to try another flavor and had unconsciously spent her money like running water.

Feeling frustrated, Logar moved her head from side to side, rubbing her forehead against the cold table, trying to clear her head.

No, I must stop indulging myself.

She had been intrigued by the wine house in the city. She found that the place that sold horrendously expensive drinks also turned out to be a really good spot to broaden her horizon and collect information. Sitting anywhere inside the wine house, she could overhear conversations of merchants coming from all over the northern kingdoms. Unlike the traveling traders in the Southernmost Region, most merchants here were wealthy and able to give insightful comments on the things that the Wolf Girl had never heard before. She had benefited a lot from hearing these talks. She could also meet some of the witches here, through whom she could also learn some inside information about the Witch Union.

Unfortunately, her remaining money could hardly support her plan to stay in the city to wait for those kinds of opportunities.

She had to take action now.

To overcome her desire for the drinks, she was going to find someone to fight and she had better leave the city to do so. This way, she would be able to stay away from Neverwinter's Complex Wine House and forget everything during combat.

When the Wolf Girl closed her eyes, the sand road arose in her mind.

Yes, that's it. This must be a challenge the Three Gods give me.

She cheered up at the thought.

She patted her own cheeks to refresh herself, put all the gold royals back in her bag, and started to pack her belongings.

She had not wasted the entire half month in the Complex Wine House. Ashes had introduced her to her lifesaver, Miss Nana Pine, and now she knew that Nana, Lily and Leaf were the three witches who had a curing ability in Neverwinter. She was happy to find that they did not just serve the great chief. These three witches ran a hospital in the city and all the residents here could pay to get their treatments which were much cheaper than Chaos Drinks.

Under such circumstances, the Wolf Girl was able to get medical care whenever she needed, even if she did not work for the great chief. This was better than what she had expected.

Among the three witches, Ms. Nana had the strongest healing power, but it only worked directly on the patient. Fortunately, Lily and Leaf could create magic medicines, such as this bottle of gray powder in Lorgar's hand, which was called "special medicine for metal-infected wounds". It was made by Miss Leaf and could rapidly stop bleeding.

Another bottle of liquid medicine named "Cleansing Water" was produced by Lily. It looked like ordinary water from wells but was able to resist infections. Lorgar thought its effect did match its name. When a warrior's wound was exposed, infection was even more fatal than blood loss and pain. This common knowledge made Lorgar quickly recognize the value of this potion. If it did not have a shelf life, she would definitely buy all the purification potion she could find.

She could buy both of these medicines at the hospital. Given their effects, she thought their prices were not high at all. They were undoubtedly the best safeguard for any warrior who wanted to challenge their limits and fight strong opponents. She was

confident that she could defeat any strong enemy as long as she could use these medicines properly.

The other things in her plan had not gone as smooth. Firstly, all the tricks she had prepared to explore the northern kingdom had turned out to be useless since Neverwinter had no "Rats Association" that the traveling traders had mentioned to her. Secondly, the residents here seemed to know nothing about demons. She had asked several dozens of people but had still failed to get any clue. Instead, she had aroused suspicion and even been followed by some men in black.

By now, she had only known demons from Ashes' descriptions and a conversation she had overheard in Complex Wine House. They had once appeared in an abandoned city in the wilderness to the north of Neverwinter.

According to her past experiences, she should not take initiative to attack an opponent whom she knew so a little about. However, she still urged herself to action, since she was eager to get rid of the Chaos Drinks' temptation and prove herself to the great chief.

She thought that since this journey was a challenge, it would inevitably be filled with obstacles and setbacks.

She was well prepared in her heart.

...

Outside the City of Neverwinter, she found an uninhabited dense forest. She took off her clothes and transformed into the big wolf, darting toward the north with her pack held in her mouth.

She did not know the specific location of the abandoned city or when she would be able to meet a demon, but she had enough patience. As a Desert Wolf who had acute hearing and smell, she believed that she could easily live for a long time in this wilderness which was a dangerous place for an ordinary person. This ability had enabled her to discover and kill hidden enemies again and

again back in the Southernmost Region.

She was confident that she would be able to copy her success again.

Stepping on the soil mixed with melting snow, she somehow felt that the Three Gods would lead her to meet the real enemy.

She did not run very far before she heard a sudden whistling sound in the air. It sounded as if something was rapidly crackling through the air.

She knew that someone was swooping down toward her!

This familiar sound alerted the Wolf Girl.

In the holy duel on the Burning Stage, the Four-winged Eagle had launched a surprise attack at her with this method. She had not been able to dodge such a quick blow at the time, but now she had enough experience to deal with it.

As an excellent Mojin warrior, she would never allow herself to be hit twice by the same kind of attack.

Lorgar balanced on one leg while turning her whole body to the side, planning to meet the coming attacker head on. She held the ground tightly with her sturdy hind legs, tensed her muscles, and opened her claws, ready to ferociously counterattack when the enemy landed.

In the next moment, she saw a big monster hit the ground where she had been, splashing a lot of snow water into the air. Its wings were even broader than those of the Four-winged Eagle. When it landed, the ground seemed to tremble.

Meanwhile, she heard it whine as if it was greatly surprised by the fact that it missed its target.

"Coo?"

Chapter 851: An Invitation from the Neverwinter Exploration Group

Lorgar found that this wild, ugly flying monster who had hairless wings and terrifying strength sounded somewhat familiar.

"Wait, doesn't it sound like the white pigeon who's very close to Ashes?" The Wolf Girl thought. A fierce image of the bird she had imagined flashed across her mind again.

"Maggie?" The name slipped out of her mouth before she realized.

"The wolf can actually speak, coo!" The monster gave out a strange cry and hurriedly retreated many steps with its eyes widely open. Seeing this, the Wolf Girl froze in the place, unable to decide whether she should spring at it. She did not know why Maggie launched this sneak attack at her but still thought this incident was a good opportunity to challenge Maggie. However, the panicked monster's actions made her think that Maggie was the one being ambushed.

"It's a witch, idiot." A crisp, immature voice suddenly came from the monster's head. "Who're you? How do you know us?

Lorgar looked up. She had to slightly narrow her eyes to look hard and found another witch floating in the air with the sun behind her. In the glaring sunshine, the Wolf Girl could only vaguely see her short blond hair flying in the wind and a weapon reflecting silver light in her hand.

Lorgar was surprised that this little girl seemed to have a lot of fighting experience. This technique of using dazzling sunlight to hurt an opponent's eyes was not very easy to master.

Knowing that these witches did not come to challenge her, Lorgar let herself relax. She liked challenges, but she did not want to pester her opponents. Besides, she still remembered what Ashes

had said about Maggie, "All the people who challenged her could not get rid of bad luck". With this in mind, she decided to avoid this trouble when she was strengthening her fighting capacity alone.

She dropped the pack that was in her mouth and transformed back into her human form. "I'm Lorgar Burnflame from the Desert. I came here with Ashes and Andrea. Ashes mentioned you on the way, Maggie."

"Ah, I remember." The big monster shrank in the blink of an eye and turned into a little girl whose height was only up to her waist but had long white hair almost touching the ground. "I've met her when I went to pick up Ashes. Coo!"

"Didn't Ashes tell you anything about me?" The blond little girl grumbled.

"You're..."

"Lightning, the greatest explorer in the Western Region, no, in the entire Kingdom of Graycastle!" With these words, she plunged down and landed in front of the Wolf Girl. "You've got to remember it!"

"Coo... why did you take off your clothes?" Maggie curiously looked at the Wolf Girl's chest and then touched her own. "Is that something you can conjure up? Coo!"

Lightning gave Maggie a knock on the head. "Stop staring at her. That's just individual differences."

Lorgar put on her coat. "So why did you attack me?"

Lightning stopped being so confident and seemed even a little embarrassed. "I thought you were a mutated snowwolf. It's our job to keep watch on the northeast, eliminate wandering demonic beasts in the Barbarian Land, and bring fresh preys back to the castle."

"And stealing birds' eggs from their nests, picking honeycombs,

and roasting food in the wilderness!"

"Those aren't our work!" Lightning instantly interrupted Maggie. "In short, there's almost no one in this area, plus the Months of Demons just ended, so..."

"I see." Lorgar nodded. She accepted this explanation since she had repeatedly heard that the border regions of northern kingdoms would become very dangerous during Months of Demons every year. After the fight against the Four-winged Eagle, Ashes had also told her many things about hybrid demonic beasts. It was sensible that these witches up in the sky had mistaken the big Desert Wolf she had transformed into as a wolf demonic hybrid.

"What about you?" the little girl asked. "This is the Barbarian Land. Many demonic beasts wander this place and something even more terrible may also hide here. What do you want to do out here alone?"

"Something more terrible... Do you mean demons?" Lorgar calmly said. "If so, I think I've come to the right place."

"You know about the demons? Coo."

"I'm looking for an abandoned city. I heard the demons have appeared there." She paused for a moment. "I want to hunt them."

Lightning was stunned for a moment and then looked at Lorgar with a strange facial expression as if she was trying hard to stop herself from laughing out. "Who told you that?"

"Is there anything wrong?" Lorgar asked.

"Demons did appear in Tacqilla, but it was over 400 years ago." Lightning grinned. "Of course, they may return at any time. That's why we patrol this area. But if you really want to go to the abandoned city, you'll have to run for seven or eight days. More importantly, the Barbarian Land is too large. Once you head in a wrong direction, you'll never see the city. You have to know that

this place is originally called the Fertile Plains and it's larger than the entire Kingdom of Graycastle... no, even larger than the Four Kingdoms combined."

"Really?" The Wolf Girl could not help but frown. She did not worry about the long distance since she had once traveled in the wilderness for two consecutive months to practice her fighting skills. She did not worry about the time either due to being a seasoned hunter. She had enough patience to wait for the demons. In fact, she really hoped to live in the wild for some time as she would never spend her gold royals unconsciously here. However, failing to find the abandoned city was totally unacceptable for her.

"Yes, but I admire your courage and adventurous spirit!" Lightning stood with her arms bent. "You're brave enough to begin an exploration based on limited information. That means you've got the potential to become a good explorer. I don't know why you refused to join the Witch Union, but you can join the Neverwinter Exploration Group. What do you think? Do you want to explore this continent wrapped in mist together with us?"

"And to join our barbecue!" Maggie cheerfully raised her hands.

"No, thanks." Lorgar could not help but sigh in her heart, feeling that things had deviated from her expectations. For example, Maggie who looked as fierce as the Four-winged Eagle, turned out to be an immature little girl instead of a qualified warrior. Lorgar came here to challenge her own limits and climb the peak of fighting skills, not to play with some child. She decided to search for the city on her own and considered this as another challenge arranged by the Three Gods.

When she was about to leave, Lightning stopped her. "Wait. I'll take you to the Taquila ruins...if you join the Neverwinter Exploration Group."

"Have you been there?" Lorgar's ears erected at once.

"Of course, we're the only ones who've touched its city wall in

over 400 years," Lightning proudly announced, "and I know much about demons and have even fought a very powerful Senior Demon. This will be unique information for you. Think about it."

Chapter 852: A Like-minded Friend

...

When the sun was setting, the shadow of the Impassable Mountain Range started to grow gradually and it seemed as if the mountain range itself was growing constantly. In the end, the shadow together with the sky mixed in darkness which engulfed the predominantly brown land that was dotted with some green areas.

This was the first time that Lorgar saw such a scene. When flying in the sky, a huge monster like Maggie could only cast a small shadow on the ground. The darkness seemed to approach slowly, but they just could not get rid of it no matter how fast they flew.

The pure vastness of the Barbarian Land filled her with awe.

Lightning moved closer and whistled. "Let's go down. We're here."

"Ow!"

When the beast was going down, the Wolf Girl on its back felt as if she was about to float up in mid-air. This feeling frightened her. She could not help but firmly grasp the beast's skin.

Before long, the three witches successfully landed on a hillside.

"This is..."

"Our Exploration Group's secret base." Lightning waved at Lorgar. "Come with me."

The little girl suddenly disappeared behind a big tree stump. The Wolf Girl came up and found that the stump turned out to be hollow. It had a small door facing the steep slope and behind the door, she was surprised to see that there was a pile of firewood and some simple stone chairs inside.

"It'll take two days to fly to Taquila. We'll spend the night here

and continue our journey early tomorrow morning." Lightning opened the window opposite to the door to let the air flow. Most of the decaying smell inside the stump instantly disappeared. "Now it's our barbecue time. Wait to try my yummy toast."

"Did you... build this place?" Lorgor curiously looked around. She had accepted Lightning's invitation and joined the so-called Neverwinter Exploration Group because the little girl had promised to bring her to the abandoned city and to provide her further information about demons, which precisely peeked her curiosity. After all, the Wolf Girl believed that the more she knew about her opponents, the easier it would be to defeat them. She had to force herself to leave the city knowing little about demons and the wilderness, but now as she finally met a reliable source of intelligence, she decided to make some "sacrifices" to keep it.

She felt it was not a big deal to spend some time playing with these two little girls.

"I didn't build it. I just found a place created by nature." Lightning quickly made a fire, lighting up the room inside the stump. "It was eaten hollow by some worms and the upper part of it collapsed during a storm. Its branches and leaves happened to form a natural roof. As for the window and door, they were cut out by Maggie. We've many bases like this in the Barbarian Land. An observant explorer is always able to spot a shelter in the wild."

Upon hearing her reply, Lorgor felt this little girl was quite trustworthy.

In the flickering firelight, she noticed that there were bolts behind the shabby door and window that could be locked to ensure safety. She also saw that a part of the roof above the open fireplace could be opened for venting smoke and this outlet could obviously act as a double for an escape hatch in the event of an emergency. All the firewood was shelved in higher places to avoid being soaked in water and two ditches were dug out in the ground to ensure good drainage. Although there was a decaying smell in the room, it

was not humid.

She noticed many other similar details in this room and it did not seem like these arrangements were made by a little child.

She started to doubt whether she had underestimated this exploration group.

Maggie took out some jerky from her backpack and cooked it over the bonfire while humming a tuneless melody. Lightning picked out many condiment cans which had been wrapped around her waist and evenly sprinkled them on the surface of the jerky. The smooth cooperation between them suggested that this was not their first time to do such a thing together.

Soon, a tempting scent spread throughout the stump.

"Try it." Lightning handed some roast meat to Lorgar.

Lorgar grabbed it and, after a little hesitation, slowly put it into her mouth.

Extremely rich layers of flavor immediately filled her mouth. It was warm and oily, and fresh and salty because of the spices being used. The meat was tender inside and it had a crispy crust. It was hard for the Wolf Girl to believe that something cooked in the wild could be as delicious as the food in the finest feast of the Iron Sand City.

She could not help but happily wag her tail and then breathed out the aroma lingering in her throat. "So...So yummy..."

"Of course, it's not common meat, coo!" said Maggie proudly. "It's the meat of a giant lake frog in the Icespring of the Great Snow Mountain. I made a huge effort to catch it! Each of its legs is the size of Lightning. It's so big that we can only preserve it and eat it slowly."

The Wolf Girl was stunned. "Lake frog? What's that? Is it really edible?"

"Don't worry. We explorers exist to explore unknown secrets and different food is one of them," said the little girl, as if she had seen through Lorgar's mind.

The Wolf Girl bit her lips but failed to close her mouth in the end. She closed her eyes and swallowed the remaining meat.

After enjoying the aftertaste in her mouth, she looked at Lightning and asked, "Are there only two members of this Neverwinter Exploration Group?"

"Currently, there are three," the little girl corrected.

"What about the other witches in the Witch Union? Why do you want me to join this group?" After thinking, Princess Lorgar still chose to be blunt. "I came to the Western Region to challenge strong opponents and improve my skills. Exploring the unknown doesn't intrigue me..."

Lightning fell silent for a while, which was rare for her. "That's because the other witches seldom leave Neverwinter. Even if some of them want to do so, few of them would like to wander in the wild. As compared to exploration, they've more important things to do... such as staying in factories to produce machines. My father said that one person alone could hardly complete a real adventure so I've got to build my own team to become a great explorer. You're the only witch we've met in the Barbarian Land."

Lorgar suddenly realized that this little girl was serious about the exploration group. This was not just a passing fancy for her but a dream she cherished. Judging from her lonely tone, the Wolf Girl could tell that most people just considered Lightning's plan as a childish game instead of something serious. This was similar to what she had thought in the first place.

For a moment, Lorgar saw herself in this little girl. Before she had won all those challenges and become a real warrior, few people had been able to understand her passion and dedication toward fighting since, even in the Iron Sand City, female warriors were

rare.

With this thought in mind, the Wolf Girl slightly sighed and pretended to be casual. "Since I'm a member of the exploration group now, what should I do next?"

Hearing this, Lightning's eyes lit up. She fished out a parchment map in her pocket and gave it to Lorgar. "The areas that we've not yet explored are all marked on this map. If you happen to step into these areas, please draw the things you discover on this map, such as bird's nests, honeycombs, wolf caves, etc. Anything will do."

"But you can't enjoy them alone, which is the most important rule of our exploration group. You've got to wait until we come back and we'll eat them together!" interrupted Maggie.

Lorgar opened the map and saw many bizarre drawings on it, with quite a few notes. For example, two chicken drumsticks and four eggs were drawn in a spot named eagle nest. Seeing this, the Wolf Girl did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Why do I feel that I've been deceived?

She put the map away. "Ahem... well, I got it, but what do you mean by 'come back'... Are you leaving for Neverwinter?"

"His Majesty Roland is about to send troops to the Eastern Region and Hermes. At that time, we'll probably leave with the First Army. It'll take at least a few months before we come back. After all, His Majesty has to depend on us if he wants to investigate the enemy's situation or carry out shooting corrections for the cannons." Lightning patted her chest. "When we're away, you'll be in charge of the exploration job in the Barbarian Land."

Chapter 853: Preparing for the Battle

After a night's sleep, the three witches set out on their journey again. After a half-day flight, Lorgar finally saw the "Abandoned City".

She could not help but hold her breath.

The city was much larger than she had imagined!

She saw a vast expanse of green land below and some damaged brown walls standing down there. Lightning had told her this city had been abandoned over 400 years ago, but even now, Lorgar could still discern the incomplete sections of the city walls.

She found that the ruins of this city covered an area that was five or six times larger than Iron Sand City and was big enough for over 100,000 people to live in. Looking at its fragmented wreckage, she could still sense its greatness. Based on the rule that each person in the city needed to be supported by 10 people in the surrounding towns and villages, she was surprised to find that there might have been nearly 1,000,000 people living in this wild land.

This is incredible!

How did a kingdom that built such a large city lose to the demons in the end?

Lorgar suddenly recalled what His Majesty had told her. "The Battle of Divine Will isn't a clash between two tribes, but a comprehensive war that determines which civilization can survive." At the time, she had been irritated hearing it, but now she somehow understood. At this moment, she now believed that the king had not been trying to intimidate her when he had said "I don't want to send you to die."

All of a sudden, she felt much better.

When Lightning gestured, they started to lower their height. In the end, they landed on a relatively complete section of the city

wall.

The top of the wall, though damaged, was still as wide as 20 plus steps which was wide enough for two four-wheeled carriages to travel side by side. In the walls covered by moss and vines, they saw a few round holes and wondered how much force was required to create such damage to these huge stone walls.

The little girl came over and said, "You may know this already, but this city was the last line of defense for the witch empire. Unfortunately, they failed to resist the demons' attack in the end."

Does this mean that the over 400-year-old witches mentioned by Ashes are actually survivors of this witch empire? Did the Four Kingdoms and the church that treated the witches as heretics all rise after the failure of those witches?

The Wolf Girl suppressed these questions since she believed that the ones who knew the story must have been deliberately blocking this information. She had never heard anything related to it from the traveling traders and even the residents of Neverwinter seemed to know nothing about it. She thought she had better not get to the bottom of it as she was not a member of the Witch Union.

She opened the map Lightning had given her yesterday. "Is Taquila located on the edge of your patrol area? If demons want to attack Neverwinter, which direction will they usually come from?"

"They'll come from anywhere to the west of the ruins, but it's extremely dangerous for us to go that deep into the Barbarian Land even though we can fly."

The Wolf Girl asked, "Why?"

Maggie replied, "It's because of the mist. Sometimes even the sky will turn red."

"What's... that?" Lorgar frowned.

"It's a life-support thing for demons, just like the air we breathe."

Lightning looked to the northwest. "Today's a nice day, so the sky looks blue. But if it's rainy or cloudy, especially when dark clouds gathering in the sky, we'll clearly see the red mist on the horizon when we're high up in the sky. This mist is toxic to witches. Even if we manage not to inhale any of it, we may still get badly hurt simply by touching it. Since we don't know how far it can reach, we seldom cross Taquila to go further west."

After that, the little girl outlined some weak points of demons.

"I see." The Wolf Girls wiggled her ears. "As long as I can pull out the pipes behind them, they'll become weak and vulnerable."

Lightning added, "But it's not easy to do so. Just like the Senior Demon I told you about last night, it has almost no flaws in a fight. If you really meet the enemy, you'd better retreat immediately and inform His Majesty, Roland."

"Don't worry. I know how to deal with it properly."

Lorgar patted her own chest, full of fighting spirit.

Demons are tough opponents, but that's what makes fighting stimulating and rewarding. Besides, being invincible as a group on the battlefield doesn't necessarily mean that they're strong as individuals. I can seize a chance to hunt a solitary demon and even if no demons appear on my journey, I can still fight the hybrid demonic beasts.

She had already spotted several big demonic beasts when she was on Maggie's back flying up in the sky. She looked out at the uninhabited wildland, feeling excited about her journey again.

The road she had dreamed about had become much clearer now. It extended further, with the sand replaced by green areas.

She believed that she was going to stay here for a long time.

...

Every day, Roland had one or two meetings to attend since he

had issued the order to go out to battle. From the battle plan to the logistics arrangements, everything needed his approval. He had enjoyed this tingling feeling of absolute power at first, but he soon got overwhelmed by the heavy workload as he got deeper into this preparation process.

Now that Neverwinter managed more than just a city, a whole team had to work on plans that had previously been made by one person. After discussing such trivial matters everyday, Roland gradually came to understand and even sympathize with those "brainless leaders" in the history, who did not like to deal with state affairs. Imagine that you have to listen to some people nagging about things that you neither remember nor understand every day. You would naturally get annoyed with it. Had Scroll not integrated and filtered the numbers in the reports for him, he would have also preferred to be a distant leader.

After all, he had been just a mechanical engineer before traveling into this world.

As compared to the complicated logistics arrangements, he paid more attention to the battle plan proposed by the Ministry of Defense.

The First Army planned to concentrate all its fire on the Holy City of Hermes that was surrounded by tall and thick city walls. They made a plan based on their experience in the Great Snow Mountain and were going to prepare enough cannons and ammunition for this attack. It was a joint operation involving the First Army soldiers, witches and the Taquila survivors.

Roland had to admit that the Pearl of the Northern Region was indeed talented. In the plan, she put forward the concept of collaborative operation, such as utilizing the abilities of the witches and Taquila survivors to launch surprise raids in all directions. She suggested that by doing so, Neverwinter troops could quickly disrupt the defensive formation of the enemy and could attack them from both the sky and the ground. Though

many of her ideas were not yet prepared enough, they were certainly impressive ones to have in this era.

Roland believed that it was a wise decision to put her in the Ministry of Defense.

To successfully implement this plan, he had to make sure that the God's Punishment Witches of Taquila would willingly obey orders rather than doing whatever they wanted regardless of the commands.

This was the first problem he needed to solve while everyone was busy preparing for the battle.

The solution was very simple.

For instance, he could invite all the survivors who were going to participate in the upcoming battle to enter his Dream World.

Chapter 854: An Unexpected Invitation in the Dream World

...

They say that practice makes perfect and Roland was inclined to agree. He was now very adept at getting into the Dream World. As long as he thought of something specific from the Dream World with his eyes closed, he could quickly activate the huge beam of light and then wake naturally up in the morning of that world.

However, this time, he was woken up by cellphone's ringtone.

Fortunately, this was not really sleeping and so he didn't really feel tired. He sprang up and picked up the phone on the bedside table. To his great surprise, it was Garcia.

"Hey, do you know what time is it?"

"It's 6:30 in the morning, which is not too early," Garcia interrupted, "and how do I know whether you'll have some other relative who suddenly came to visit?"

The corner of his mouth twisted, knowing that she was still sore about being stood up by him last time. "Uhm... is there anything I can do for you?

"Didn't you always want to know what the Erosion is? The Association has set a time for new members to visit this afternoon. After you finish your breakfast, come to Room 0827."

"Didn't you say it's in the afternoon?"

"You're not the only new member. It takes time for us to go join the other new members from the other districts." She raised her voice. "What? Are you going out with some relative again today?"

"Yes, and more than one," he replied in his heart but did not dare to speak it out loud otherwise she would definitely come to stand in his doorway. More importantly, he was indeed very curious

about the "Erosion", so he answered, "Oh, I see, but I slept late last night, so... you know, I don't smell very nice. Let me take a shower first. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"..." She was silent, but he somehow still felt her contempt for him. "Please be quick!" she shouted and then hung up the phone.

Now he had to hurry up.

He put on his clothes, walked into the living room, and found Zero busy frying eggs in the kitchen. She skillfully used the spatula in her hand, not looking like a junior high school girl at all.

"Good morning," he said, "I'm going out now, but I'll be back very soon."

She revealed a suspicious expression. "Uncle, are you going to do your morning exercise?"

"Well, yes..." he replied casually, "by the way, there's a staff meeting in the afternoon. I may come home late today so don't wait for me to have dinner."

"Got it," the little girl pouted.

Outside the apartment building, the street was bustling again. Wisps of steam were coming out of the rice noodle restaurants and fried bread sticks were sizzling in the work at the stall. There was also broadcast sounds and traders' peddling. It was late autumn and most people wore thick clothes, however, some elderly people, who wore only short-sleeved shirts and sweatpants, kept practicing in the morning. They were running as fast as young men around the apartment building.

Roland walked into an alley not far from the apartment building and stopped in front of a closed shop. On the door, there was an eye-catching leasing advertisement with a big word "rented" written on it.

He took out a key and opened the side door.

Inside the shop, more than 20 witches simultaneously knelt to him saying, "Your Majesty!"

For a moment, he felt as if he had returned to Neverwinter.

Walking into this shop was like entering another world for him.

"Welcome to the Dreamland," he nodded and said.

...

"Do you mean to say that we have a special task today?" On the second floor of the shop, Phyllis, Faldi, Ling and Dawnen were waiting for him to give further orders. As the first batch of pioneers entering this Dreamland, they had known something about this world and would serve as guides for the rest of the Taquila survivors here. They could tell them how to enjoy the life here and could instruct them how to hunt Fallen Evils, which reduced the burden on Roland.

This store was one of his rewards for the last hunting trip and he had hired an agent to rent this place. Compared to the warehouse before, it was much more spacious and private.

He told them about the Martialist Association's invitation. "According to Garcia, the association is planning to tell the new members the inside story. We'll be taken to the association's headquarters whose location has remained a secret so I want to take this chance to find out the base where they store the Force of Nature. I need your help."

"Let my bug stay with you." Faldi summoned her Magic Bug Nest and picked a bug. "So I can know where you are all the time."

After he agreed, the witch placed the beetle on his collar. It quickly climbed into his long hair to hide. Though he could clearly feel a thing on his neck, he still looked the same from the outside.

He suppressed the feeling of discomfort and turned his head to look at another two witches. "Phyllis and Ling, please come with me. Do you remember how to take a taxi?"

Phyllis nodded. "Wave to stop a taxi and tell the driver to follow the car in the front. Then pay him when we arrive."

"Don't chat with the taxi driver and no matter what he asks, we'll just remain silent." Ling added, patting her chest, "Rest assured, Your Majesty, we remember it clearly!"

"Good," said Roland, "when you arrive, let Ling try to sneak into the headquarters first. Although there's no God's Stone of Retaliation in this world, the Martialist Association may have some other methods to affect your magic power. If you can't break in, don't force yourselves. Your most important task is to keep yourselves hidden. Got it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the three witches replied simultaneously.

"So... Your Majesty, what about me?" Dawnen pointed to herself while eagerly looking at him.

"You stay here and take care of the other Taquila witches." He took out ten 100¥ bills from his wallet and gave them to her. "Here's the money for takeouts, including breakfast, lunch and dinner. Let's postpone the entertainment plans until tomorrow."

"What... But I'm also very good at sneaking into places." Dawnen was disappointed.

"That's why you have to stay here. If something unexpected happens, you're the only one who can lead the witches to leave this place without being noticed." He patted her shoulder. "Of course, if you successfully take care of everyone here today, I'll choose a day to take you to a movie theater."

"I... got it." When she heard this special reward, she suddenly cheered up. "Please leave it to me."

He had taught the four witches how to order take out food and all the quick learners had already mastered this skill. He believed that as long as Dawnen was here, they would be alright.

Now he was well prepared for his trip to the headquarters of the

Martialist Association.

Chapter 855: Power and Responsibility

After making all the arrangements for the trip, Roland rushed back to the apartment building as fast as he could. Unfortunately, he underestimated Garcia's diligence.

In the corridor, he saw a familiar figure leaning against the wall near Room 0825 while talking on the phone and watching the bustle downstairs. She wore a gray and white T-shirt, loose black pants, and ankle-high skate shoes, looking both youthful and full of energy. If he had never known her, he would have thought of her as a girl-next-door type of woman, a lively and cheerful character often seen on TV.

Judging from her face, she was still a little angry but not cold and harsh as the Garcia he remembered. He could not deny that Princess Garcia Wimbledon, Queen of Clearwater, looked surprisingly good in this sports outfit.

When he came close to the door of the room, she saw him. "Alright, I've got something else to do. I'm hanging up and don't call me back if it's only to try to persuade me."

"Is the Clover group calling you again about the demolition matter?" He pretended to be casual and asked.

"It has nothing to do with you." She put away the phone, her expression skeptical. "Where have you been? Didn't you say that you wanted to take a shower?"

"Do you know how many ways there are to get rid of an odor? One is cleaning, another one is covering it with a new odor." He talked nonsense while keeping a straight face. "The tenant, that little girl living with me, needed to use the bathroom. She didn't want to be late for school so I really couldn't fight with her. I thought I could get some sweat to cover my smell so I went running outside." "But, surprisingly, this body just doesn't sweat very much. Now I see why you martialists always look neat and

clean. Well, this isn't important at all. Anyhow, I didn't sneak away. You see that I'm standing right in front of you now, don't you?"

"..." Garcia stared at him for a long time before opening her mouth. "I don't want to interfere with your private life, but it's not good to indulge yourself. More importantly... it's also about education."

"What?" Roland was stunned.

"I mean those girls who came out of your apartment... Why can't you get things done somewhere else? Why do you have to bring them home? Have you already forgotten that there's a little girl in your home," said Garcia, frowning,

He almost choked upon hearing such words. He had deliberately arranged the Taquila witches to cut off their consciousness and get into the Dreamland once Zero had left for school, but he had never expected what the other residents would have thought about these women coming out of his home. Garcia had the complete wrong idea based on what she had seen.

"It's true that some martialists will become less decent when they become famous. In the face of money and fame, a man will easily lose himself, but don't forget that we're fighting for this world and always have to maintain a high morale. Overindulgence will only make your movements slow..."

"Ahem, I got it." Feeling that she wanted to give him a moral education lecture, he immediately interrupted her. "We can talk about this matter later. Could you please let me change my clothes first? I don't want to be late for our visit."

She closed her mouth in displeasure and glared at him. "...Be quick."

...

He dressed up by putting on his new suit. Under Zero's gaze, he

put a fried egg into a sandwich bag to eat as breakfast and walked out of the apartment.

"You..." At the door, Garcia blinked at him.

"It's my first time visiting the headquarters and I thought that I should dress formally." Roland shrugged. "I'm a new member of the association and casual clothing seems disrespectful for such an occasion. What do you think?"

"Hah... whatever you want." She shook her head. "But to my surprise, you look... quite good in this suit."

"Of course, you get what you pay for. This trim custom-made suit cost me a lot of my 'robbery income'. After all, the clothes make the man. An ordinary-looking man would look great immediately after dressing up and, as an added benefit, I'm slim and have nice long gray hair. Back in the world where I lived before, people would believe that I'm an elf prince," he thought to himself.

They went downstairs together and waited outside the residential area. A large bus soon came to fetch them. He noticed that it did not have a number plate and all its windows were covered by black curtains. He could not see anything inside it.

"Get on the bus," Garcia whispered. He somehow felt that she looked much more serious now.

When he stepped onto the bus, he pretended to casually look back at the street side. He saw that Phyllis had already stopped a taxi.

When the door was closed, he found that it was surprisingly bright inside. All the lights along the aisle were turned on and quite a few people were sitting on the bus.

Most of them were dressed in various styles and looked like a group of performance artists. Only a few seemed like normal people, but they all were engrossed in their own affairs instead of greeting Garcia. He soon noticed that some guys, who obviously

harbored ulterior motives, had fixed their eyes on him since he had gotten on the bus.

Garcia did not say anything. She held Roland's hand, which was very unusual, and walked with him directly to the back of the bus.

"Are they your colleagues?" he whispered to her when they sat down.

"The Martialist Association isn't a company." She rolled her eyes at him. "Most people in this bus are newly awakened people just like you. It's also the first time for me to meet them."

"So many of them?" He was a little surprised. He roughly counted and found there were over 20 people in this bus.

"Yes, there are quite a lot of them. The last time I went to the association, there were only five or six new members... but that's not surprising," she replied. "although ordinary people know nothing about the changes in the world, the ones awakened with the Force of Nature can still sense them. I've told you that not all the awakened ones choose to join us. The centrists aren't less than the association's martialists. Now, as the Erosion intensifies and the number of Fallen Evils rapidly grows, the situation has become more dangerous for the centrists. More of them are going to join our association in the future."

"So you mean most of them are wild martialists or self-training martialists?"

"You did find more appropriate words to describe them." She curled her mouth into a smile. "I guess so, but that's just between us. Don't call them that publicly. They don't like restrictions. That's why they refused to join the association. Gaining great strength will boost a person's ego, making him or her become arrogant. This not only hinders their progress but also gives them a very odd attitude."

"As for the odd attitude, I think I've already experienced it," he

said casually.

"In the past, a conflict had happened where some wild... martialist joined the association and killed several martialists when they were performing a hunting job. In the end, the Defenders stood out to kill the wild martialist. You'd better ignore their provocations as the association will severely punish such behaviors."

"The wild martialists are that strong?"

"Yes, these people often get attacked by Fallen Evils and, compared to newly awakened ones, they're much more experienced in actual combats and are better in reacting quickly in emergency situations, but they're usually obsessed by worldly affairs. If you stop overindulging yourself and practice hard, you can rapidly improve yourself."

She sighed and continued. "The Force of Nature is a gift from the deities. It's an ability to protect ourselves rather than a tool to exploit others. If we fail to stop the Erosion, the entire world may cease to exist. Many awakened ones just enjoy the pleasures brought by their power, but completely forget their responsibility."

He found what she said sounded familiar... He thought for a moment and realized that perhaps this was also the reason that those witches, who had been aware of the harm caused by demons, established the Union 800 years ago.

Suddenly, it quieted down outside. The grating sounds made by the bus wheels rubbing against the road became deep and simple as if the bus was traveling alone in a spacious tunnel.

Half an hour later, the bus finally stopped.

Just when he thought that they had arrived, the bus started to shake slightly and he felt weightless all of a sudden.

The bus was sinking into the ground.

Chapter 856: Prism City

"This is..." Roland looked at Garcia.

"It's a lift," she proudly responded. "Wait a moment, soon you'll be able to see."

No long after she had finished talking, the light outside of the window turned from red to green and then the curtains were automatically lifted, revealing the view outside.

Roland immediately understood the reason for her pride. The bus was parked on a huge iron plate, surrounded by yellow and black warning signs painted on concrete walls with five or six metal orbits embedded in, which continuously issued a gear grinding sound.

They were traveling down a tunnel with each descending level marked by dazzling spotlights and huge number signs. Within a few minutes, they had descended more than 100 meters, but the numbers were still growing.

Seeing the continuously rotating orange alert lights in the outer edge of the iron plate, which was like a scene from a sci-fi movie, he suddenly felt that as compared to this sophisticated way of entering, his way to get into Third Border City was way too backward, which was still reliant on hemp ropes and steam engines.

His respect for an organization that could construct something like that was instantly increased by a few levels.

Without substantial economic and political power in the background, a bunch of martialists would never be able to construct something like that.

No wonder Garcia was so proud of it.

Even those strange tempered wild Awakened were stunned by the scene. They started discussing in the bus while looking out of

the window, as if they wanted to explore how deep the place was actually hidden.

"This was actually a good move," Roland thought. The closed curtains before were probably meant to keep new people from knowing the specific location of the headquarters, but after entering the ground there was no such need anymore, so they could let everyone admire this spectacular project, which could also pose as proof of the association's power.

He was curious to see if Ling who was following them could find a chance to infiltrate.

When the number became 235, the iron plate finally stopped descending and many holes appeared on the wall. Then, the bus moved again and headed into one of them.

The trip was very short this time as they soon reached their destination.

Roland followed Garcia out of the bus and discovered that there was a wide underground square in front of him, being illuminated with dense headlights, almost as bright as daylight. If not for the previous part of the trip, it would have been hard to believe that he was deep underground. A sculpture was erected in the center of the square. At first glance, it looked like a big hand holding an irregular polyhedron. There were also several buses parked next to the statue. It seemed that they were not the only newcomers.

"Are these people from other cities?" Roland pointed at the crowd around the sculpture.

Garcia nodded in agreement, "the association owns many divisions, but it's only two Headquarters. In order to get into contact with the Erosion, one must come to these two places."

He was briefly stunned, "The erosion from the outside world... Can it be seen directly from here?"

Not only it can be seen, but you can also touch it—though you

would never want to do that." Garcia rolled her eyes. "Did you think that we're just a cult which asks people to fight the evil? The purpose of visiting the headquarters is to show newcomers the real danger that the world is facing. Some things, unless seen by your own eyes, are impossible to believe them—disaster is close at hand."

Just then, the lights above them suddenly dimmed down and darkness suddenly came from all directions, making everyone's vision to focus on a small area in the center of the square. As though a curtain was opened on stage, two bright beams of light fell from the dome, one shining on the sculpture and the other shining on a black dressed lady.

She was standing on a platform at one side of the square, looked around thirty years old, wearing a classic Martial Arts garment with her long black hair tied up on her head. One of her eyes seemed to have been damaged and was covered by an eye patch. The Force of Nature in the Dream World was not limited to gender, and it did not have the kind of effect that the magic power had in affecting the appearance. She looked no different than an ordinary person, not too tall, but with more of an imposing manner.

The woman waved at everyone and then said loudly, "Dear Awakened ones, good afternoon. I am Lan, Chief Disciple of the Rock's defender. Welcome to Prism City!"

"Prism... did she mean the polyhedron on the sculpture? " Roland thought and heard whispers coming from the wild martialists, who appeared to be quite dissatisfied with her words.

Before he could ask Garcia, Lan continued, "Of course, welcoming the new students was the responsibility of Defenders, but unfortunately, Sky City encountered some problems so my master and the other three defenders all left two days ago. In order to avoid wasting time, I'll be the one to welcome you all."

"I know that some of you awoke many years ago and can't be treated as real newcomers. However, the situation has changed drastically. Since you're willing to come here, it means you've approved the ability of the association and you should naturally put all the past temporarily behind you. Combating the Fallen Evil should be your priority now. The association doesn't care about your past identity and status, but only your future performance—the more critical the crisis is, the more the awakened should be united. If you don't accept the practice of the association you're still free to leave right now!"

While she was talking, the black dressed woman made a waving gesture, but no one in the square moved, and even the noisy discussions quieted down.

"This Chief Disciple is quite adept," Roland smirked. With the increase of the Fallen Evil, the endangered wild Awakened had no choice but to apply to join the Association. No matter who they were before, they could only follow this option now. The woman was aware of that, so deliberately acted as if giving them a choice, but in reality, gave them no choice at all.

Strength was an important criterion when persuading an opponent. Being the Martialist Association that could protect others, demonstrating their own strength would be the most effective way in this case.

Garcia looked at Roland with a perplexed expression for a while and said softly, "She's my master."

"What?" He was stunned. "Your master?"

"She's the senior that I mentioned the other day," Garcia sighed. "Unless you have to, try not to be around her too much. My master doesn't like irresponsible and not punctual people."

"Oh, so that was the case," Roland thought.

"Since you've all made your choice, then the association

welcomes any new blood." Lan gazed upon the square and nodded with satisfaction. "I'm not going to say much. Nothing is more impressive than personally experiencing it. Now, please come with me and see for yourselves the imminent crisis of the world—you'll soon realize that the Battle of Divine Will isn't far away from us! "

Chapter 857: The Nature Of the Erosion

Hearing those words, Roland could not help but tremble.

Why would there be Battle of Divine Will in the Dream World too?

He looked at Garcia but her expression didn't change at all as if she already knew or she didn't care about it.

Roland could only keep his doubts to himself and under the lights, followed the crowd towards the square.

Reaching there, he noticed that there were many passages embedded in the towering rock walls like the structure inside a honeycomb. Whether it was entering from the ground or transitioning between the aisles, people had to take elevators on the rails. Now that the square was not as bright as before and his sight got used to the darkness, he could see dozens of elevators going up and down like floating fireflies. They gave off a feeling of a futuristic city.

Even though this design was beautiful, it was extremely inconvenient to use. If it was built in the city center as a landmark it would be alright, but buried under the ground like this, who would be able to see it? And in case of a fire, power outages and other emergencies, it would even be hard to escape from here.

Of course, building the Headquarters underground was already irrational even when considering the aspect of preventing others to infiltrate or the necessity of keeping it a secret.

There must have been another reason to do that unless the Martialist Association had too much money to spare.

As they entered the aisle number 24, Roland realized that the ground he was standing on was actually a moving ladder and he only had to stand on it to keep moving.

Adopting such a design in an underground structure was actually

quite shocking.

As if realizing his doubts, Garcia shrugged her shoulders. "There used to be a mine here, and we used the abandoned mine tunnels to built all the elevator aisles you see on the walls—but of course, part of them were newly excavated. This depends on the speed of the Erosion."

"The Erosion happened in the mine?"

"Not exactly but for now you can think of it as such."

"So the reason for building the Headquarters underground is to prevent the Erosion from developing?"

Garcia looked at him with a weird expression, "No, it's not to prevent the Erosion from developing but to guard against Awakened ones with an ulterior motive."

When she saw that he wanted to ask more, she shook her head and said, "You'll soon understand."

The passage soon led them into another hall, which looked a lot like a lecture hall, with descending levels, forming a podium at the bottom. The defensive measures here were obviously much better. There were martialists everywhere, wearing the same cloths, standing expressionless on either side of the hall and staring indifferently at the newcomers, showing no welcoming gestures.

"Aren't warriors supposed to be straightforward and passionate? With an attitude like that towards the newly awakened ones, no wonder people weren't willing to join them," Roland thought.

Once everyone has sat down, the Chief Disciple Lan stood up on the podium.

Without saying anything, she opened a curtain on stage, exposing the bottom of a huge glass chest.

Roland couldn't help but frown.

A dark red "crystal" was placed inside the chest. It seemed

weightless as it floated midair. It reminded him of Taquila's magic core. But the Force of Nature in the Dream World was not displaying ever-changing effects like the magic power. Additionally, this crystal did not seem to be realistic. It actually looked like a bad sample of a 3D-model. But seeing Lan's serious expression, it didn't look like she was joking.

"This is..."

"Erosion," Garcia said with a deep voice, "or actually a 'loophole'".

"What?" Roland was stunned.

"The one on stage is just a small part of it," she sighed, "Our world is becoming riddled with holes. That's the essence of Erosion."

"I think some of you may have already guessed or felt it—" Lan gazed through the audience and said word by word. "An evil force has entered our world. It allows the Fallen evil to multiply in numbers quickly, posing a serious threat to the safety of the awakened ones. But as far as I am concerned, this notion is incorrect. It was never an evil force, but rather an... overlay from another world. "

The audience suddenly uproared.

"What do you mean? Can you elaborate?"

"What's this other world?"

"When did the Martialist Association become an academy of science?"

"So what're the Fallen Evils, aliens?"

In sharp contrast with the real newcomers, those who had awakened the Force of Nature long ago started yelling loudly, without respect to the Chief Disciple.

"Quiet, " Lan said unmoved, "I'll answer your questions after the following demonstration."

As she said that, the glass chest slowly rose, exposing the

"crystal", and then three hanging rods fell on top of the podium with a camera hanging from each of them. At the same time, the wall behind Lan also lit up—it turned out to be a huge screen showing three different pictures, shot respectively from the three cameras.

Roland quickly noticed a phenomenon that shocked him.

No matter from which direction you looked at it, the crystal always showed the same appearance.

How's that possible?

In order to look like this, it's got to be a perfect sphere.

An angular thing represented discontinuous changes when it was rotating. It should have appeared visually different on each side. However, he was stunned when he didn't find any difference or movement in the three pictures as if it was not a moving object but rather a red spot on the screen.

His brain had subconsciously identified it as a virtual image as if the crystal itself didn't exist.

But Lan's next move once again surprised Roland.

The Chief Disciple took an iron bar and inserted it straight into the red crystal. However, the stick did not penetrate the virtual shadow as he expected but instead disappeared in it in front of everyone. Through the screen, they could see that all the three cameras captured the original look of the iron bar, clearly showing its polishing traces and angles, but the red spot in the three pictures looked still the same. It seemed as if there had been three iron bars inserted from a different angle... into one same spot.

When Lan pulled it back, the bar in her hands had become shorter.

The hall suddenly went quiet.

Seeing such a strange scene, everyone remained silent as if

someone had clamped hand over his or her mouth.

After a while, someone said, "Can I come up to see?"

"Help yourself." Lan nodded.

The man walked to the podium and stared at the red crystal for a long time. Suddenly, with a shout, he reached out to it—his skin was lightly colored in Silverlight. Apparently, he was using the Force of Nature. Not many warriors could achieve that. Garcia had once mentioned to Roland that those who were able to spur out the Force of Nature like that, resembled a lot the Fallen evil. Normal weapons were unlikely to hurt them. To be able to master such a skill, one had to be extraordinarily talented, or very experienced through life and death situations over the years. Thus, they were far stronger than the average martialists.

This was probably the reason for their arrogance.

Lan stood still, without any intention of stopping him.

His palm went through the crystal unobstructed, without catching anything, and just like the iron bar before, it disappeared. Soon after, the man screamed—he raised his hand, showing only the half of a bloody palm!

Everyone gasped in astonishment.

Roland finally understood what Garcia meant with those words, "You definitely don't want to touch it", because everything that came into contact with it turned into a void.

After the victim was taken to be treated by the martialists, a couple more stood up, hoping to come up and have a closer look. Lan allowed all of them, but they were much more cautious while observing. In the end, the Chief Disciple simply arranged for everyone to take turns to experience the incredible phenomenon from a close distance.

Roland was no exception as well.

When his turn came, he acted carefreely and circled twice around the crystal, but he suddenly felt his heart sink.

Its internal red rippling light seemed very familiar!

He had once seen a similar scene in the Divine Land too.

But in that domain, the red light hanging above him represented the Bloody Moon.

Chapter 858: The Membrane Overlaid

"You're Roland, aren't you?" When Roland was contemplating the "Erosion", Lan suddenly spoke.

"Ah... it's me." He recovered from his solemn thoughts and Garcia's words flashed across his mind... "Hang on, would she be trying to find trouble with me for having stood her up?"

"I've heard Garcia mention you several times." She did not face Roland, so he could not see her expression. "She said you're a rare and independent Awakened who's not disturbed by desire and ambition. This is very rare for the average person, so she's very happy that you've agreed to join the association."

"Uh... Is that so?" Roland replied reluctantly.

It was clear to him that Lan must have been implying that he was a 'wild' Awakened when she said 'independent', but he wondered why she said that Garcia was elated when he agreed to join the association. He clearly remembered that Garcia had been expressionless when she had let him fill out the application.

"Although I hate people who aren't punctual, this is a common problem for many. After all, you can't feel the change of time nor can you hear it ticking, so for some special people, it's not an unforgivable flaw."

Inexplicably, Roland felt that there was a glimmer of emotion when the Chief Disciple said these words.

"There's one thing you should know about special people. Though they're uncommon, there're still quite a number of them. If they don't treasure their special feature and maximize it, they'll be eliminated sooner or later."

"Is this a warning that I should work wholeheartedly for the association and not cause problems like the other wild Awakened ones?" Roland secretly frowned as he really did not like this kind of

preaching. Perhaps he would not have minded it before, but after he became the King of Graycastle, he had also changed his mentality.

"After you've finished watching, you can leave," Lan finally turned around and said calmly, "listen carefully to what I'm going to say next as it might help you. Next—!"

Roland twitched his mouth and did not take this brief conversation to heart.

He was overwhelmed by a cloud of confusion.

Whether the Martialist Association could defeat the Erosion and save the world was something he did not care about.

After returning to his seat, he still frowned.

What are the "deities" thinking about?

According to the research data of the underground civilization, the Bloody Moon is the key to transforming the magic power, and also the basis for the existence of the Dreamland—in a certain sense, it's the equivalent of the mastermind behind the scenes, existing like a background. Even if one wanted to annex the Dream World, there's no need to show their original appearance, right?

The witches can see the real body of the Bloody Moon because that's the real world, yet this Dreamland is a domain purely founded on his and Zero's memories. Wouldn't this mean that the mastermind had seen the circuit signal operating behind the world?

Or could the speculation be wrong? Or maybe I had misunderstood some information that had pointed me in the wrong direction?

"So do you believe it now?" Garcia glared at him. "That's definitely not something that can exist in reality."

"I've never doubted you." Roland shook his head and tried to

suppress his distractions. "But your master wasn't as scary as you'd described."

"Was there something wrong with the master?" She was a little surprised.

"She said quite a lot about how special I was and how the association thought highly of me," Roland said sarcastically, "by the way... she said you were elated about me joining the association. Was that so? I really couldn't tell at all."

He looked at the ex-Princess Garcia in anticipation, as he wanted to see what kind of expression she would reveal. Would she deny everything completely or attempt to conceal herself hurriedly? No matter what she did, it should be very interesting.

But he never imagined that she would portray a look of "you're really such a fool".

"What're you talking about?" said Garcia as she rolled her eyes. "When you were on the platform, the master didn't speak at all... Do you think that I'm blind?"

Roland could not help but be stunned.

"This distance might be considered far for ordinary people, but I'm a martialist. I could even see clearly how many strands of beard you had on the stage. Don't try to lie to me. You're still too inexperienced," she said with a note of disdain.

Didn't... speak?

Just as he was about to ask more questions, Lan had already re-closed the glass chest. She clapped her hands and made everyone focus their attention on the podium—this time round, there was much less talk in the hall.

"Our world isn't flat, it's a membrane. Some can understand this and others can't. But it doesn't matter. Just listen to me." She turned around so that the screen behind showed what was being said. "The membrane has a curvature that, in popular terms, is like

an arc—and in some places, this change is even more pronounced. If there are other worlds beyond this one, then there'll be a possibility that the two worlds will intersect, and this intersection is the Erosion."

"Of course, this is only a speculation, but it's the only explanation for the vision that we saw—since the Erosion was discovered, all nations have kept up their research on it, but unfortunately the world there has completely different rules. Any means of detection are declared null and void, and even the matter here can't be stabilized beyond the borders. As you've seen for yourselves, the iron bar was the proof."

"Huh? What's the connection with the Fallen Evils?" someone asked.

"Of course there's a connection. The strength they gain comes from another membrane—and that's why the Fallen Evils aren't afraid of ordinary weapons in this world. The overlapping membrane temporarily connects the two worlds, and I don't know what kind of effect that would have on the other world. But for us, the rules still work: the movement of energy from high to low creates a series of phenomena that is incredible." Lan raised her voice and said, "To be exact, not just the Fallen Evils, any Awakened person would be related to this energy."

"What did.. you say?"

"My power belongs only to me. It's not related to any goddamned membrane!"

"Does the Martialist Association think that we're the same as the Fallen Evils?"

The hall suddenly burst into a commotion.

This time Lan did not say anything to stop the commotion but waited until everyone became silent by themselves before she went on to say, "Of course there's a difference, we can control it, yet the

Fallen Evils can't. But we have to admit that in some sense were quite similar to the Fallen Evils—especially on this point about being able to resist injuries caused by ordinary weapons. Has everyone considered another point? How come the martialists can't dominate the entire world even when they can freely manipulate the Force of Nature and can't be hurt by ordinary weapons?"

"Well..." The crowd started to whisper.

"Because the Erosion won't last forever," Lan said straightforwardly, "as the curvature changes, the overlapping membranes will gradually separate until the next reunion—the cycle can be long or short. A short one could be a day while the long one could be millions of years. And we encountered the Erosion about 2000 B.C. and the overlapping lasted only less than a century. Once they separated, the Force of Nature will disappear without any trace. Given that, even the Awakened ones managed to dominate the whole world, two thousand years of interval would be enough for this empire to vanish."

"How can you be sure about what happened thousands of years ago?" Although someone still questioned her theory, his attitude was much less aggressive.

"I don't know," said the Chief Disciple, frankly. "It's just an assumption. Even 2000 years ago, there wasn't even a scientific way of observation and recording. If you want to validate it, we'll have to wait until 2000 years later. But we mustn't forget that history is always full of surprising coincidences. By comparing the biographies and history books of different regions, you'll find that many epic heroes and legends were born during that period, and then further on the myths emerged—and most myths were related to doomsday and the salvation. Can we assume that it was the Erosion that caused this?"

There was a brief silence below the stage, and after a while, someone asked, "And even if those epic heroes are the Awakened

ones of the Force of Nature, what does that have to do with us? According to what you said, the Erosion will end by itself, so what's the purpose of the propaganda of your association against the Erosion?"

"Don't forget that apart from us, there are also the Fallen Evils," Lan answered quietly. "This is what I said at the beginning. There's no evil force. The energy just spreads according to the rules. It has no malice, but that doesn't mean the affected people will also have no malice. We're just at the beginning of the membrane overlap, so such loopholes will continue to increase and expand. The Fallen Evils will also increase in numbers. And only the Martialists that use the same kind of force can defeat them—this is a competition of the survival of the fittest, and only one party can survive. If we can't defeat the Fallen Evils, not just the Awakened ones, but the whole human existence will be completely destroyed by them."

Chapter 859: Two-Pronged Attack

...

"Your Majesty... Your Majesty?" Nightingale's voice woke Roland from his daze. "The City Hall Director is still waiting for your reply."

"Ah, I already know about this," said Roland as he blinked his eyes, trying to concentrate. He handed over the report in his hand to Barov and said, "Let's proceed according to what you said."

"Yes," said Barov. As he saluted Roland, he also solemnly added a sentence before leaving. "Please take care of your health, Your Majesty."

After the chief left the office, Roland asked Nightingale, "Does my face really look that bad?"

"Well, you look okay," said the latter after some deliberation, "it's just that you've been daydreaming more recently. Could this be related to the Erosion of the Dream World?"

Roland shook his head. "The changes in Dreamland can't really affect me. It's just a few strange things in retrospect that have been bothering me. There's nothing to worry about."

"That's good to know," said Nightingale while she pursed her lips.

This was already the fourth day since he had left the Dreamland. Although Faldi had succeeded in locating the headquarter of the association, Ling had failed to sneak into it—according to her, there had never been a place like that one. It was built underground, but it had been impossible for her to find any hiding spot there and some shiny "light band" had covered her head. It had just kept glowing, no matter how long she had waited.

Afterward, Ling had even despondently requested for Roland to punish her for failing her task, but naturally, Roland had refused to do so.

The next play plan had been executed smoothly, and Roland had brought more Taquila witches into his Dreamland, but what he had seen and heard in the headquarters that day still troubled him immensely.

The whole incident had so many strange factors that could not be explained.

The first was the conclusion about the membrane world.

He had always believed that the Dream World would present a modern society filled with the Force of Nature in order to integrate both his and Zero's memories and keep his internal government self-consistent. In other words, no matter how many weird phenomena there were, they were all rules based on the needs of being self-consistent—most of these rules came from his consciousness, which he understood and was able to accept.

However, those words spoken by the Chief Disciple Lan completely exceeded the scope of his knowledge reserve.

The only thing Roland knew about the membrane theory was that it evolved from the superstring theory. These two theories were particularly profound and he had never carried out in-depth reading on them. Unlike Quantum mechanics, he had at least read through one or two popular books about it. In the Dream World, these theories should have been hidden as if they were invisible, just like those blank books that only had covers.

However, both Lan's explanation and the derivation formulas and evidence displayed in the lobby screens seemed to be logical—this was the first time he saw something totally unintelligible in the Dreamland, as if a High school student had dreamed about the Grand Unification Theory in physics which was absurd and incredible.

This even made him think that the Dream World today was completely different from the world when he had first entered.

As if something was growing wildly out of his sight.

Another weird thing was the Chief Disciple herself.

After Garcia had reminded Roland, he had recalled that the vision, hearing and reaction of the martialists was better than ordinary people. If Lan had spoken to him on the stage, not only would the defenders, but even the first two rows of new people in the lobby have been able to hear something. But the fact was that no one at that time had shifted their attention to them. It had not sounded like a whisper to him, yet, surprisingly, it had not attracted any attention. At that time, he had not paid any attention to this point. But later on, when he thought about it, he questioned why a newcomer who was shown special attention by the Chief Disciple did not cause public concern?

The things Lan said also left him scratching his head.

"Listen carefully to what I'm going to say next as it might help you!"

How would the knowledge about the origin of the Erosion, the relationship between the martialists and the Fallen Evils help him? Even if he wholeheartedly wanted to join the association and become a savior of the world, knowing these would still not be important to him, right?

All these weird signs made Roland form some resistance toward the Dream World. He intended to temporarily stop the connection with Dreamland, once all the God's Punishment Witches had gone in once to enjoy themselves.

It would be better to behave cautiously whilst the Battle of Divine Will was approaching.

"Your Majesty?" Nightingale's voice once again could be heard, but this time with some urgency. "You look like you're in a daze again."

"Ahem, I'm fine," Roland shook his head and threw his

distractions behind him. "It's just that I've got a little more things to consider lately and so I'm a little sleepy."

"But why do I feel that you're hiding something behind those words," Nightingale sat on the table, propped her feet up and said, "don't tell me that in the Dream World, you and the witches..."

"That's impossible!" He suddenly felt dumbfounded. "I just took them to experience the taste of different flavors only!"

"Well... that's true," Nightingale blinked and revealed a cunning smile. "I'm a bit worried about that world that I can't enter. There's no way to protect you at all times, and in case they suddenly make trouble, that would be problematic. After all, they've passed hundreds of years of unconscious days. And now that they've finally recovered their senses, I'm sure they would try to revisit all their past feelings. But that's more than 20 women. How could you cope if they all swarmed towards you?"

"You're getting more ridiculous." Roland glared at her and said, "Who did you get these ideas from? Can't you spend more energy on studying?"

Nightingale covered her mouth and said, "I was just joking."

"If I had your ability, it'd surely remind me loudly that you were lying," Roland snorted and said, "from the very beginning, you wanted to ask this, right?"

"Well, I admit it... But this was not just my own opinion," Nightingale stuck her tongue out. "I was also asked by someone else to raise this question."

"Asked by someone else?" Roland did not have the time to ask who it was as there was knocking on the office door.

He had to temporarily withdraw his questions and said, "Come in."

The door opened and a tall man quickly walked in, neatly closed his legs and then raised his hands to salute Roland. "Your Majesty,

Iron Axe is here to report to you!"

From Port of Clearwater to Neverwinter took almost four or five days, and by boat it was a rather laborious thing. But on the face of this foreign officer, he could not see a trace of exhaustion. His eyes reflected an energy that was full of war spirit.

"Fine," Roland nodded reassuringly. "I think you already know about Neverwinter's combat plans?"

"I've heard Brian talking about it," said Iron Axe. "The First Corps will be divided into two roads from east and west to regain Graycastle before crossing the border, and striking Kingdom of Dawn's Glow City. But there's something that I don't understand. If you asked Brian to take over my task and stay in the Port of Clearwater to protect Miss Echo, who's responsible for the Eastern Front?"

It seems that even before the task had been assigned, Iron Axe had already placed the responsibility of leading the Western Front attack on his shoulders. Roland could not help but smile. "Brian is still lacking in experience. Leading a garrison isn't a problem, but he could still be prone to accidents if he had to lead an entire army alone, so Eastern Front Army will be your responsibility."

Iron Axe was slightly stunned and replied, "Then what about the Western Front..."

"I'll lead it personally," said Roland slowly.

Chapter 860: Their Respective Journeys

When the last statistics report was handed over to Barov, the City Hall Director finally let out a deep breath and waved his hand toward his subordinate. "You can leave now."

"Yes, my Lord."

The latter bowed respectfully and closed the door of the office on his way out.

The only person left in the room was Barov.

He opened the drawer and removed more than a dozen forms from the inside, flattened them on the table, and neatly stacked the newest one on top.

In that case, all the necessary supplies for His Majesty's expedition were now fully prepared.

Barov gently rubbed the paper, as if he were stroking a girl's tender and smooth skin. The rows of numbers seemed like a complex password to ordinary people, but in his eyes, it was a wonderful music score.

It took only a week and a half, for Neverwinter to complete a large-scale logistics transfer. Whether it was food or gold royals, they had surpassed the quantities of any previous expedition. Through his proposals and statistical tables, he could see ships carrying wheat flourishing from the inland river to the Northern Region. And he could hear the melodious sound of gold royals colliding with each other.

He was unable to control this feeling of indulgence.

If he wanted to name this score, "power" would undoubtedly be the most appropriate name.

Now, the power lay in his hands, and he could play in any manner he wanted.

After an accumulation of three years, Neverwinter's prowess had reached an incredible level—not just the corps, but also in all other aspects. When he had been an assistant to the Treasurer in the old king's city, he had known a little about the financial situation of Graycastle. And it was precisely because of that, he realized how amazing Roland Wimbledon was.

Now Neverwinter's resources were probably a combination of all the other cities' strength in Graycastle.

Unfortunately, no one could share this joy with him.

Barov removed his monocle and glanced at the empty table opposite him.

There was only one other person who could understand these figures and experience the joy that came with it: Pearl of the Northern Region. Sometimes he felt that the latter was the same type of person as he was.

However, this regret dissolved very quickly. Compared to the option of possessing exclusive power, everything else paled in comparison.

He stood up and walked to the window. He pulled out a peculiar coin from his arms and flattened it in his palm. In the late spring sunshine, the coin surface showed a glittering engraved pattern, a "mountain".

This was the emblem of the Witch Cooperation Association. He had found this coin three years ago in the Western Region forest.

He secretly retained it. He originally wanted to use it as evidence of the Lord colluding with the witches in return for his own safety, when the church attacked the Western Region. But now, this emblem had become his lucky charm.

His Majesty who protects the witches is evil? Of course not, the evil ones are those who were defeated by His Majesty—they had no strength, but they still acted arrogantly. This was the biggest

crime. Even the demons in the Barbarian Land were not as abominable as them.

Fortunately, this situation would not last too long.

Although His Majesty's plan to attack the Kingdom of Dawn was delayed by a little, he had already waited for two decades, so waiting for another year was not an issue at all.

Graycastle should be handed over to a more capable man.

Barov knew that the day His Majesty unified the kingdom and was officially crowned as the king, he himself would also climb to the pinnacle of power.

He touched his beard and could not help but laugh.

"Today's test will stop here. Have you packed your luggage?" Agatha asked while sorting out the experimental data, "Tomorrow is the day of departure, so don't forget anything."

"I don't have many clothes and I don't need to carry any item," Isabella shook her head and replied calmly. Living in Neverwinter was much simpler than she had imagined. Except for repeatedly displaying the god stone to allow the ice witch to observe the records, she controlled the rest of her time as long as she did not leave the diplomatic building. She was neither harassed nor humiliated. She had thought that the witches would have treated the Pure Witches very differently. However, sometimes she felt that Agatha's attitude toward her was the same as with the other witches. There was hardly any difference.

"By the way," she said and added another sentence, "about what happened last time... thank you for telling me."

"You mean the news about the church?" Agatha shrugged. "If it were me, I'd still think of going back and taking a look, whether it'd be a farewell or a break. But let's not talk about that now. You can't go on your journey like that... That's certainly due to my

negligence as I've just found out that you've been wearing the same suit." She dropped the notebook and frowned as she walked over to Isabella. She grabbed Isabella's sleeve and felt it. "It's gone all white here, and it's winter clothing. When the weather turns hot, aren't you going to suffocate?"

"That's nothing." Isabella wanted to say that she had been subjected to more rigorous training, but thought for a moment and decided to hold her tongue.

"This expedition isn't just a matter of a month or two. Let's not mention the fact that you might not be able to wash your clothes daily on the road and even your companions wouldn't be able to stand it. Agatha said decisively, "Now that we still have time, I'll take you to the convenience market and we can pick a few pieces of clothing."

When she heard the words "companion", she became slightly surprised and hesitated for a moment before answering, "But... I've got no money."

She was atoning for her misdeeds, and naturally, she would not get a monthly payment like the members of the Witch Union.

"Well, I do," said Agatha nonchalantly. "You can think of it as a loan," she said.

"But it'll be after five years..."

"Five years is a short time compared to Taquila waiting for hundreds of years, isn't it?" The Ice Witch interrupted by saying, "The Battle of Divine Will won't end that easily. You won't always remain like this unless that's what you want." She placed her hand out. "So what're you hesitating about?"

Isabella did not answer. She suddenly felt that the sunset rays were a little dazzling.

Through the golden rays, Agatha's body gradually faded away, and only her hand could be seen.

Isabella lowered her head and took the latter's palm.

At that moment, the sun seemed to be linked with her.

"Are you sure it'd be alright for me to follow you?" Anna asked while she was lying in Roland's arms and blinking her lake blue eyes.

As he had been busy settling the God's Punishment Witches recently, so it had been a long time before the two could spend some quiet time together. It was exactly for this reason, that even late at night the two were still whispering, trying to catch up on all the words that they had missed during their absence.

"We've been preparing this for such a long time, and anyway it's alright to take a rest at times," said Roland, stroking her smooth back, "furthermore, this expedition isn't just for the sake of combat. Propaganda is also very important—for example, when socializing with everyone and attending banquets, it would be unacceptable if I weren't accompanied by a female companion."

Anna nodded in agreement and buried her head shyly. Roland saw a touch of pink on her cheek by the bright moonlight.

It was clear that Anna was intelligent enough to understand the meaning of this remark.

In formal occasions, appearing as a king's female companion was a statement.

"I said that one day, all the subjects of Graycastle will know who you are, even if you are a witch," he said earnestly.

Anna did not ask questions such as "Is this really alright?" or "What if everyone opposes it?" Instead, she replied in the same earnest tone, "Even if I'm a witch, I want to be with you, no matter what happens in the future."

Roland lifted the corners of his mouth. This answer was really in

her usual style.

"Well, so we're both in agreement."

...

The next day, the Neverwinter port was crowded with concrete boats that shipped the First Army and war supplies. They were arranged neatly in a column, before slowly leaving the Redwater River.

At the front of the fleet was "the Roland". At the top of the flagship, a symbol of the Graycastle, High-Tower and Spears flag, was waving in the wind and attracting everyone's attention. Everyone in Neverwinter knew that when their Lord returned again, he would become the only king in the land.

Someone shouted "long live the king", and the whole pier continued to shout out in unison.

It sounded like thunder rolling over the sky, or the horn at departure—

The war began in the midst of the lively voices of the people.

Chapter 861: The Redwater Plot

On the 10th day of the expedition, they were at the Redwater River.

Roland stood at the front of the shallow water gunboat, looked at the waving light in front and was in quite a heroic mood.

Behind him was a huge fleet, and despite the fact that some of the ships had turned eastward three days earlier, the remaining ten steam-driven paddle steamers remained a rare sight on the river. The chimneys, standing like a forest of iron, were painted in striking snow white color, and the black smoke that erupted drained a "dark cloud" over the river.

After entering the Central Region of Graycastle, there were significantly fewer vessels, which meant that the Kingdom's trade center was moving westward. However, the influence of several major cities in the central region was still there. Compared to many single-masted boats in the Western Region, most of the sailboats that were found here were more exquisite and beautiful.

All the merchant ships that they encountered along the way kept their distance. Bold sailors would lie on the ship's side, and point to the flagship of steel exclaiming endlessly. The captain or businessman who recognized the High-Tower and Spears flag would even bow and salute the vessel.

Roland was very satisfied that he could amass this property after three years. But he was even more gratified about those young officers who were brought up by the City Hall.

They did not have a lineage of 100 years nor did they have a rich and powerful family background. They just had a short-term universal education and mastered literacy. If this was in the past, at best, they could only work for the nobles by doing some miscellaneous administration for a living. But in Neverwinter, they gradually became the backbone of all the departments.

Because of the lack of patronage, the new generation of officials fully supported Roland—other than him, no one else would use the normal civilians that had no status.

Because they had never held any post of management, they would act cautiously in accordance with the rules and regulations. When they encountered any problems, they would take the trouble to ask their superiors for help and would not be arrogant or conceited like the nobles.

As they were selected from ordinary subjects, they were used to carrying out tasks on their own. The Ministry of Agriculture officials led the farmers to grow wheat and the officials of the Ministry of Construction demonstrated to the new workers the characteristics of cement. This scene was common in all the Neverwinter cities. A powerful centralized government needed to have strong control over the people at the grassroots level in order to exert its fast and efficient potential. This action by the civilian management was exactly what was needed.

Of course, the civilian class that jumped to management level did not come without its flaws.

Just like a poor man who had never owned property and suddenly came into fortune, it was easy to fall into the trap of greed and shortsighted traps. The level of education at Neverwinter was not high, so they probably would not possess personal qualities and professional ethics. Fortunately, by Roland's side, there were Nightingale and the internal review by the Security Bureau that could effectively curb this tendency. After several times of screening and severe punishment, those who remained in City Hall had understood the limits of His Majesty.

The ever-growing number of young officials had become Roland's guarantee of expanding his own power. It could even be said that his plan to regain the kingdom was based on the number of officials available.

Now, he finally had the foundation for unifying the country.

"Notify the Adviser Department, to go to the observatory for a meeting." Roland turned toward Nightingale. "How should we go about taking over Redwater City? It's about time that they come up with a plan."

...

In fact, it was not the first time that the Neverwinter fleet visited Redwater City. As early as six months ago in the Tooth Extraction Campaign, the First Army had patronized this central city.

The Adviser Department's opinion was reasonable: "Your Majesty, Redwater in the Central Region, is considered second only to the old king's city. Not only does it own a vast territory, there are also many nobles. I'm afraid we can't force them to hand over the power like what we did with Willow Town."

Sir Eltek, Morning Light's father, further elaborated by saying, "Earl Delta, the lord of Redwater City, isn't an ambitious man. This can be seen from the city's tax revenue—he could easily request for more as he controlled the intersection of the inland rivers. The Delta family had managed this area for several generations. Even if they gave up their manor, they would still have a comfortable life. As compared to rebellion, the Earl would certainly know how to make a wise choice."

"But this doesn't mean that the other nobles will follow suit. It's by no means easy to consolidate their opinions, especially the Tririver and the Rock Ridge. It's rumored they're not on good terms with Earl Delta." He pointed to the map and said, "And once your claim is officially proclaimed, it's likely to bring the opponents together just like what happened in the Western Region before, so we speculate that the First Army may have to fight and force them to surrender their power."

"Of course, this isn't bad. Destroying rebels can reduce the trouble of management later on, and your great strength will

certainly deter the rest of the misfits. So we suggest that you summon Earl Delta alone to convince him before announcing the decree—although those nobles should have more or less already known about your intentions. If someone disobeys later on, you can just send troops to clear them out."

Roland nodded and looked silently at the map.

He did not mind using military actions to persuade his opponent. The First Army was used to doing that. However Sir Eltek's words, "just like what happened in the Western Region before" gave him some concerns. The time he had spent to eliminate the five big families was much longer than that of seizing Long Stronghold and king's city. The reason was that back then, the area of a fief had been far larger than that of a city. He had to take a few days just for a detour. The Redwater City had an even larger manor around it as compared to the Western Region cities. If he really wanted to clean it up, it would take more than two to three weeks, plus the subsequent placating measures.

"Isn't there a faster way?"

"Well, Your Majesty, faster means..."

"I don't want to spend too much time on this. Later on, there'll be several other cities. If they all require such measures, by the time we get to the Coldwind Ridge, half of the summer would have passed."

"This..." The Earl and the others were silent for a moment.

"There's a method but it might be detrimental to your reputation," muttered Edith suddenly, "bring them together and announce to everyone on the spot."

"Oh?" Roland looked at her. "Go on."

"I've encountered a similar problem, even worse," said Pearl of the Northern Region and then she gave a detailed account of her plan to eliminate the Hawes Family and Lista Family. "I'm afraid

that if I'd followed the tradition of the nobles, and had declared before taking action, the Northern Region would have still remained in their hands."

After listening to her plan, the staff of the Adviser Department could not help but gasp.

"Your Majesty, this..."

"It's hard to be convincing without evidence and without trial!"

"If it gets found out, I'm afraid that it'll cause the suspicion of the other nobles."

"Have you forgotten that there should be no other nobles at Graycastle other than His Majesty?" Edith said flatly. "No trial was needed when the former nobles dealt with the civilians." She turned toward Roland and said, "But it depends on whether you want to carry it out, after all reputation—"

"Only the victor is qualified to write history," Roland interrupted her, "for example, if you don't say anything, no one will know you've done something like this. I have to thank you for your trust in me, and anyway, this matter won't be found out. And as for the takeover of Redwater City, let's follow your ideas."

Then he saw a strange glimmer in the latter's eyes. At that moment, Pearl of the Northern Region's breathing seemed to hasten.

However, she quickly masked her uneasiness and bowed her head.

"Your Majesty, as you wish."

Chapter 862: Obstacles

In his mansion in Rock Ridge, Earl George Nery finally received the letter from the Western Region. He unsealed the letter and glanced over it, his face clouding over.

"What did it say?" Asked a restless Baron. On his chest, there was a kamon of God of River, indicating that he was from the Levitan family, whose domain was located at the intersection of river courses and was regarded as a fairly famous family in the local area.

There were over twenty nobles like him in the study room.

Nearly half of the feudal nobles around the Redwater City had gathered here.

Instead of answering him immediately, George glanced at him coldly and handed the letter to Guye Yurianne, the Earl of Tririver. After the latter read through the letter, George began to speak slowly, "Roland Wimbledon has taken away all the power of the Willow Town lord and occupied his domain as well."

"The new king... really did it?"

"Hell. So what does he want to do? To deprive us of our titles just as the news we received has suggested?"

"How can he do that? That title is passed down from my grandfather!"

Someone suddenly said, "Willow Town is too close to the Stronghold and it's very small. It doesn't mean that he'll do the same to Redwater City, does it?"

"I guess He didn't seize the entire king's city before is because he doesn't have the capacity. Maybe we should wait."

Hearing that, George could not help sneering in anger. He said, "To the Western Region, is Redwater City farther than the City of

Evernight? Are your domains larger than the whole Northern Region? Are you blind or stupid? It's not news that Roland Wimbledon wants to take away the power of all nobles. You see what happened in the Northern Region. The businessmen have hinted it repeatedly, and now the Willow Town provides the best example. And now you're wondering whether you will be the next?"

"Please mind your language, Your Excellency."

His mean and rude remarks made the nobles frown.

"Let me explain," said Guye, waving his hand toward the Earl of Rock, "In fact, I believe everyone is aware that our new king is definitely not an ordinary person. Since he went to Border Town, everything he has done is beyond imagination. So it's meaningless to judge his actions by the old standards and your past experience. I have sent my men to the Western Region. Roland Wimbledon doesn't conceal his real thoughts. He plans to abolish the noble's feudal power and just reserve their titles... This has basically become his mission of his ruling, and the slogan has been openly put up in the city square."

His calming voice eased the mood of the nobles. He continued to say, "You may say that Redwater City isn't his domain. But the Longsong Stronghold wasn't his either, let alone the Northern Region. Roland Wimbledon will be the King of Graycastle sooner or later. When that day comes, even if he claims that the whole kingdom is his domain, what else can we do other than accept it? And that will definitely happen." After a short pause, Guye said, "If we lose our domain and subjects, what else do we own?"

"But what can we do?" Huth, another Baron, interrupted impatiently, "King Timothy was defeated, so was the church. Who else can stop him? Last time when the Western Region army came to Redwater City, we saw how they fought. Within 60 meters, the snow powder weapon is irresistible, and even heavy-armored knights can't approach. How can we resist such power?"

Hearing that, the crowd chimed in.

"Of course there's a solution," George said in a cold voice. "Although the snow powder weapon is powerful, it has some flaws. It can only be used in an open space. The bigger space, the more powerful. But when in a confined environment, its power is limited."

"A confined... environment?"

"The Lord's castle, for example," he said word by word while glancing at the nobles who were present, "When Roland Wimbledon arrives at Redwater City, he'll definitely live in the castle. Only a few guards can live there, so as long as we can arrange more men there, we'll be in an advantageous position."

"Did Lord Delta agree to cooperate with you?" Levitan asked in surprise.

"You know his personality. It's impossible for him to do such a thing. Even if he was pointed by a sword to his neck, he would not resist." said George, shaking his head dismissively, "But he really did me a lot of favor. In the castle, there're lots of secret paths which lead to the outer city area. As long as we send our people in the castle ahead, they won't be found."

"How did you... know it?"

"Thanks to Earl Delta, he likes to dig here and there in the city, and I bribed the masons for the information. As the saying goes, a crafty person has more than one hideout. I don't know whether he's cautious or timid," George sneered and said, "I originally planned to kill him in this way, but I think it'll work just as well on Prince Roland."

"But this is treason..." Huth muttered, "And if Roland Wimbledon were killed, his army would likewise flatten us!"

"Who said we're going to kill him?" replied George, knocking on the table with displeasure. "As long as we seize Roland, we can

have the situation under control. Since the new king is alive, his army won't dare to put his life at risk. Maybe we can even force his army to retreat. Once the news spreads, those nobles will definitely side with us. Don't forget, the Western Region is the only domain he's truly had his hands on. When that day comes, it's hard to say whether the Duke of the Northern Region will still support him."

"But after all, he is..."

"He hasn't been a real king yet, Baron Huth." Guye Yurianne interrupted him, "He hasn't held the coronation, nor did he proclaim himself as a king. We can select another Wimbledon, who believes in aristocracies and follows the traditions, as the king. We'll find such a man in the king's city as long as we try."

"By that time, maybe someone will stand out before we look for him." George lowered his voice, "And we should know how much we'll benefit from this. Losing everything or glorifying your family, what are you hesitating about?"

His words immediately caused a stir among the nobles. Obviously, they already knew what they should choose.

George Nery was not surprised by the result. The nobles he summoned had been in favor of Timothy before. Even if Timothy was dead, they would not choose Prince Roland with whom they had a conflict of interests. Further, the prospective benefits were enough to tempt this group of cowards to take a bold action.

However, their ability was limited. If no one led them, they were nothing but a rabble. He was the only qualified person to assume the post of the lord of Redwater City and run the Central Region.

After a moment, Levitan and his party seemed to have made their decisions. They asked, "What're we going to do next?"

"Put some of your reliable knights under my command... Then, just wait," George said with confidence.

Chapter 863: A Prelude

Two days later, the fleets of Roland Wimbledon arrived at the pier of Redwater City.

Earl Delta, who had received the message earlier, took the matter very seriously. At his command, the pier was not only thoroughly cleaned, but was also decorated with eye-catching satin and banners. On the day when Roland arrived, Earl Delta led the nobles outside the city gate and greeted Roland in the suburb. He was much more enthusiastic than he had been upon the arrival of the First Army earlier.

As the great nobles in the Central Region, George Nery and Guye Yurianne were naturally among the greeting crowd.

He had to admit the new king's presence was indeed impressive. It was not the first time for George to see the steel ship named after Prince Roland. However, after seeing it again after half a year, the ship still shocked him in the same way as it had done before. Following it, concrete ships were neatly lined, much more than last time. Their snow-white chimneys and heavy smoke seemed to reach to the sky. When he saw the soldiers who wore uniforms of the same color walk down the pier, he could not help admiring it. If he had such an army to serve for the Rock family, it was not impossible for him to fight for the throne in the royal palace of the king's city, not to mention Redwater City.

"This fool. I really don't know how he's smartened himself up." George spatted and said, "When I was in the king's city about five or six years ago, he was obviously the stupidest one. He was totally incomparable to his elder brothers. Even his little sister, who had scarcely been out of the shell back then, was much better than him."

"Doesn't that mean that Prince Roland is the most sophisticated one?" said the Earl of Tririver, shrugging, "Since he can develop

the border to such a degree and overshadow all of his siblings, he's definitely not a fool. Remember to smile and show your hospitality."

"Of course I know," George replied carelessly. "After all, he's a member of the royal family. Even if he's a fool, I'll do my best. Rest assured."

"That's great."

At this moment, a loud horn sounded in the direction of the pier and a stir was aroused in the crowd. He knew that Roland Wimbledon, the ruler of the Western Region, or the new king of Graycastle, showed up.

"How's your preparation going?" George asked under his breath.

"I've already sent 51 men to the castle," said Guye, who remained still in his position, pretending to be eager to see the arrival of His Majesty, "In two days, I can send the rest of them."

"Me too," said George, smiling faintly, "so we still have lots of time. Then we'll have a bigger chance."

He had talked with Guye several times what Roland would do after he entered Redwater City. Roland was most likely to reach an agreement with Earl Delta before he announced to forfeit their feudal power. After all, Redwater City was a large city and there were lots of nobles with domains around it. Therefore, it was impossible for him to act as quickly as he did in Willow Town.

Since Delta was indecisive, it might cost him several days to make up his mind. And then it would take another few days before the news spread and the other nobles responded to it. During this time period, George could fill the secret paths with a sufficient number of his people without being noticed.

Then when the bell at midnight tolled, their men would rush into the castle altogether. The snow powder weapon would be useless. Since they had more people they needed and they were in a

favorable geographical position, it would be impossible for Roland Wimbledon to escape.

"He's coming," Guye reminded George.

George immediately put on a smile and stepped forward. Among the greeting group, the first row was the family members of Earl Delta, and the second row was great nobles like him.

Earl Delta stood beside the new king and was introducing the nobles with a flattering smile. When George saw his round face with his broad grin and quivering double chin, he could not help having a bad turn in his stomach.

He still remembered that the Earl had been the same obnoxious toady when Timothy the second prince had led his army into Redwater City.

"Your Majesty, this is the lord of Rock Ridge, Earl George Nery." Delta finally walked to him.

"I'm greatly honored, Your Majesty," said George with his most cordial tone, pressing his chest with his right hand and bending deeply, "Rock Ridge has the most fragrant tea and fruit wine. It'll be my great honor if you can pay a visit."

"Really?" The reply from Roland took George by surprise, "Where's your domain?"

"As a ruler, shouldn't he say that the honor is his and that he would pay a visit at his convenience?" George thought, but he quickly replied, "Just on the east of Redwater City. Two kilometers to the east and behind the first mountain you see is the domain of the Nery family."

"It sounds like a nice place. I hope you'll treasure it," said the new king, who patted him on the shoulder and smiled.

Treasure it? What does he mean?

George frowned without Roland noticing it. Without betraying

his suspicion on his face, he replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Nothing out of normal happened during the greeting ceremony. After everyone met Roland, Earl Delta announced that he would hold a grand banquet at the Lakeside Villa. Then he ordered the knights to clear the road ahead and escort the king to the city.

Everything went as planned and even a little exceeded his expectation. The new king's army did not rush into Redwater City. Instead, they were stationed in the pier area in the suburb. Roland was followed by less than 100 guards. When they lived in the castle, about 20 guards would be able to guard outside his bedroom.

He was certain about the result.

However, he felt a little restless out of no reason. Roland's smile seemed to be weird... He could not tell the reason, but he could not help feeling an ineffable chill looming over his heart.

George shook his head and put all the thoughts behind. "Maybe I was wrong," he thought, "Even if he's brooding on something, they'll be meaningless the moment he entered the castle. When he's in my hands, I'll talk with him about what happened earlier."

By that time, I won't have to try to please him, and he'll not be in a mood to show such a strange smile.

The night fell.

Everyone in the city knew that the last prince of the Wimbledon family was in Redwater City. As he was most probably the king of Graycastle, the whole city celebrated it. The vast Inner City was as bright as the day, so was the Lakeside Villa. It had always been the place to entertain distinguished guests, and the dining hall, which was built above the lake, was linked with Redwater River and supported by dozens of hundreds-year-old larches. A trestle-like corridor led to the shore and there was even running water in the hall.

To please the new king, Earl Delta spared no effort in bringing all the seasonal gourmet food in the surrounding area to the table, and some of them were something George first laid his eyes upon.

However, he did not pay much attention to the food.

In addition to Roland Wimbledon's action, he had to also keep an eye on those nobles who supported the Lord of Redwater City.

After the new king showed up in the dining hall, George could not help frowning.

All of those guards around Roland turned out to be women.

Chapter 864: An Announcement

George silently counted and found that there were altogether 10 women. The number did not exceed what the royal family was allowed to have. Among them, six were guards, wearing short robes and leather pants for convenience. As soon as they entered the hall, they scattered and each took a position at a corner.

It was not surprising for a lord to keep some female guards. Actually, George also kept two in his mansion. He did not really expect them to fight but just had them for fun, especially when he went hunting in the wild. It always aroused him when he took off their seductive leather armor and cleaned their feet landing on top of them.

But it was weird to bring them on such a formal occasion.

In terms of physical strength, women were born to be weaker than men, and the gap between them was insurmountable. Therefore, most outstanding guards and knights were men. Except for having fun, no one would bring those women guards who were mere eye candies.

Not to mention the appearances of these women were... so unbearable.

George was not picky, but he believed that these women would be kicked out even in some low-grade brothels in Redwater City.

From their homely faces and rough skin, he guessed that they were about 30 or 40 years old. Wrinkles and dark spots spread nearly from their foreheads to chins. They had a slender figure due to long-term exercises, but their faces really turned any men off.

Did Roland Wimbledon have such a special taste?

However, when he turned his eyes to the woman holding the new king's arm, he immediately repudiated his previous assumption.

That was a gorgeous young woman who looked perfect from

every angle. Her lake-blue eyes were like crystal gems and attracted anyone who looked at them. No doubt they were the most beautiful eyes George had ever seen.

Once she entered the hall, the crowd fell into silence for a moment. Even the appearance of Edith Kant, the Pearl of the Northern Region, had not created such a stir. If the girl had not stood beside the new king, she would definitely have been surrounded by most of the nobles in the hall.

The last two women were veiled. It seemed that they did not want others to see their faces.

That was rare at a banquet, though acceptable. If you did not want to be seen, you could choose not to attend it. Dressing in this way would attract more attention.

"Have a drink?" Guye came over with two glasses of wine at the moment.

"Thanks," he took the glass, followed him to a corner of the hall, and asked, "Did you notice anything?"

"The woman beside Roland is... a little weird," whispered the Earl of Tririver. "Don't you think she's too gorgeous?"

"Did you notice that too?" George touched the God's Stone of Retaliation in his pocket and whispered, "I guess... she's probably a witch."

"I also think so. If she were from any noble family, it's impossible that we had never heard of her."

If was not a secret that Roland recruited a lot of witches. News of this kind spread from the king's city to Redwater. At first, the news only spread among the Rats, but then after the king's city was occupied and the church was defeated, more and more people talked about it. The new king did not publicly proclaim his attitude, but people gradually stopped persecuting witches, as no one dared to go against the new king regarding this matter.

However, few nobles took the "recruitment" seriously.

In their opinion, a witch was like a woman guard. She would be kept for appreciation, and be used when they had special needs. After all, witches were renowned for their beauty. Even during the period when the church and Timothy were hunting down witches, some people would hide witches at risk of their lives.

Nevertheless, it was not understandable as to why Roland brought a witch to the banquet.

Did the constant victories make the new king lose his head and start to act recklessly in his private life? Or was he really serious about the woman...

George immediately denied his second guess.

Witches were infertile. That alone made it impossible for her to be his wife. Perhaps he brought her to the banquet on a whim.

However, that was good. When Roland was in his hands, this was undoubtedly excellent "evidence" of his crime.

He could blame Roland for ignoring the noble traditions, and even for insulting the ladies who came to the banquet with the nobles. Of course, the criticism would not affect a royal family member much but would definitely incriminate that witch. As for how to punish her, of course, it would be decided by him.

Earl of Tririver apparently also had the same thought. He grinned and said, "You can't have her alone."

"Of course I won't forget you, old friend," said George, raising his glass, "I'll surely let you take the first shot."

They looked at each other, and could not help laughing after a moment.

The banquet went well. After drinking a toast with the new king, the nobles with similar titles gathered together. The men talked about their recent hunting, harvest and affairs, while women

talked about their delicate silk garments and luxurious jewelry.

George Nery was also surrounded by lots of nobles. At least it appeared that his supporters were no less than that of the lord of Redwater City. Some people who had been on the fence also started to approach him, as they had apparently heard the rumor that the king was prepared to abolish their feudal power. George had more confidence now, and his previous inexplicable uneasiness gradually faded away.

That was right. He had enough time.

Roland Wimbledon, after all, was an outsider, and he had to make exponential efforts if he wanted to make any changes. However, the Rock family had been living here for hundreds of years, so he was naturally at a geographical advantage. This advantage became even more palpable when Roland appeared to be reckless and arrogant. Now George even believed that they could directly capture the new king just with the guards of his and those of the earl of Tririver's, as well as Levitan and other nobles.

However, after thinking for a moment, George gave up this idea. After all, the Lakeside Villa was an open space and was hard for them to hold. They also have difficulty in transferring troops, so it would be more appropriate to carry out his plan when Roland lived in the castle.

Just after two days, the young king would be a caged bird.

"Please be quiet." Just then, Earl Delta suddenly clapped his hands and drew everyone's attention to the center of the hall. He said, "His Majesty wants to tell you something."

George put a piece of juicy spareribs into his mouth and thought, "Is he going to make the closing speech? Finally, the banquet is over."

"First of all, I would like to thank Earl Delta for preparing this sumptuous banquet. I'm also pleased to see so many people be

invited here," said Roland, looking around the hall with a smile, "If I remember correctly, nearly all the nobles around Redwater City have come?"

Seeing his smile, George could not help feeling a chill. He thought, "It's that smile again... A fake smile. His smile simply hanged his lips... What's he thinking?"

"Except for two who are ill, the rest of the invitees are here, Your Majesty," Delta nodded.

"Well, I'll take this opportunity and tell you directly," said Roland slowly, with his hands behind his back, "From now on, Redwater City and the domains around it will belong to me, the king of Graycastle. It won't be conferred in the future. In other words..." He paused and said, "None of you will be hereditary nobles any longer."

Chapter 865: Mind Reading

"Wh—at?"

George blinked. For a moment, he couldn't believe his own ears.

Looking at Earl Tririver next to him, he saw that the Earl was bewildered too. At that moment, all the nobles' expressions resembled Guye's. The room was shocked into silence, so much so that you would have been able to hear a pin-drop in the room.

This... wasn't a part of the plan!

Could this mean that Roland Wimbledon has already persuaded Earl Delta?

He then looked at the Lord of Redwater City and his assumption was immediately dismissed. The Earl was no calmer than the others, and with his eyes wide open, he looked at the new king with disbelief. Obviously, he did not expect the new king to have this plan up his sleeve when he himself was the one who invited the guests over to the banquet.

To Delta, it was only routine to be attending the banquet in Lakeside Villa.

As was the same for the others.

This is just Roland's selfish move!

Is he... mad?

"I think most of you have noticed that the feudal system has severely hindered the flow and specialization of personnel, which in turn has restricted the development of our nation's productivity. Considering that Graycastle... and even the entire human race may soon fall into a major crisis, I have to make this tough decision, which is to take back all the land and power in your hands so that people in the Graycastle can work as one."

"Specialization of personnel? Productivity? Major crisis? What

the hell is the guy talking about? Who understands those things?" George thought and swallowed hard.

Yet the new king seemed not to care about the nobles' opinions. He kept on talking as if there was no one present, "For the moment, I believe that this decision is both right and necessary. Take The Western Region and the Northern Region of Graycastle as examples: the disappearance of feudal nobles didn't cause chaos in the two regions but instead brought them order. The unified Neverwinter decrees, planning, and deployment of policies have propelled the city into the industrial age, with large factories taking over from household workshops as the workhorses of production. At the same time, a large amount of wealth has been created, and people who actively participated in this process have benefited greatly. These are undeniable facts, and I think you can all see it."

"With that said, I don't mean to eliminate the entire noble class. I just want to tell you that losing your manor and the title doesn't mean you'll lose everything. In this new system, you will gain better, more abundant opportunities. Imagine a cake the size of your palm. Although you might be able to barely satisfy your hunger if you swallow it all, if you were to enlarge that cake to the size of a table, you will have more than enough even if you only get a slice of it. Since this reform is beneficial to both you and your subjects, it shouldn't be hard to understand why we want to make it a comprehensive reform across the kingdom. Many of you must have heard of the reform, right?"

"Indeed, many nobles know what you're up to, but they didn't expect you to be so impatient." George thought quickly. After the initial shock, he gradually regained his composure. To his surprise, he found that this accident was not necessarily a bad thing, and it might even be favorable for him!

It was almost impossible to reach a consensus with the amount of nobles present. On the contrary, it would aggravate the preexisting

conflicts between them and the new king. George was happy to see that the king's talk actually saved his effort to make himself look good in front of all those present. After all, compared with making his move after persuading the Redwater City Lord, what the new king did was too reckless. This could quickly push those who previously wanted to support Earl Delta to his side.

As expected, when the nobles came to their senses, one of them said, "Your Majesty... I'm not too familiar with the situation in the Western and Northern regions. Would Your Majesty be so inclined to give me a couple of days to decide?"

"Yes, this matter is of utmost importance and would decide the fate of my house. I can't make the decision on my own."

"Your Majesty, can you guarantee that each of us will get more wealth?"

"What if the reform fails? If we lose our lands, doesn't it mean that even the original small cake would be lost?

"Your policy must be wise and brilliant, but... I'm not a merchant, Your Majesty!"

"That's right. There we go," George gloated. The more questions they throw towards the new king, the more insightful he himself would appear. If Roland were unable to assure the nobles of his reformation plans, he would be stuck in quite an awkward spot.

Roland, however, kept his unwavering facial expression. After the crowd rambled on for a while, the King raised one hand and silenced the room. "You seem to be misunderstanding something—what I just said was not a suggestion but an order—did you think that you had any say in this to begin with?" His tone turned less friendly and colder. "I don't even need your consent. I'm fully aware of who'll stand on the wagon of progress and join me, and who'll act as the stubborn rocks blocking the wheels just to be crushed into dust."

"How... do you know that?" Earl Delta said with surprise.

A smile crept up Roland's face. "Because I can read minds."

"What... did you say?"

"When faced with things beyond your comprehension, it's normal to be suspicious." Roland turned over, signaled to Edith, then said, "In that case, I'll demonstrate it to you."

The Pearl of the Northern Region nodded. She smiled to the nobles and said, "His Majesty's ability can be easily proved. As long as you repeat every word that I say, you'll understand it instantly. No lie can escape the detection of His Majesty's mind reading. The Wimbledon's rule of Graycastle depends on the mastery of this ability. I want to make it clear that anyone who doesn't repeat after me will be considered as one of those rocks to be crushed."

"Nonsense! This is absolute nonsense. There's no such a thing as mind reading. It would have been more credible if a witch had said that." George Nery retorted in his heart. Wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation, he was not afraid of the bewitchment of any evil force.

He wanted to call for the other nobles to help him put a stop to this farce, but he found that many nobles in the crowd looked like they were going to go along with Edith's suggestion. Many believed that they would have nothing to lose even if they tried, so they were actually waiting for Edith to continue speaking. George was not sure whether they were waiting for the King to make a fool of himself or were afraid of openly offending the King.

Edith smiled. "Everybody, please listen carefully. The first sentence is—I completely agree with His Majesty's new policy, and I'm will willingly cooperate with the officials dispatched from Neverwinter."

The nobles repeated carelessly; a few even failed to hold their laughter, feeling that what they were doing was rather ridiculous.

"None of you are telling the truth." Roland gave his judgment.

"Although a little regretful, it's actually understandable. If it were me, I guess I also wouldn't have easily believed in the king who had stayed at the border area of Graycastle the whole time. Please continue."

"Wait a minute... Something's wrong." George frowned. "Would any king accept this result so calmly?" Being the Lord of Rock Ridge himself, although he was aware that not every one of his subjects was sincerely obedient to him, he never would want to hear that right to his face. "Shouldn't he be embarrassed and annoyed? Why is Roland Wimbledon so calm?"

"The second sentence—Althought I don't understand what His Majesty wants to do, the feudal power isn't something I can't live without. I am willing to cooperate as long as the opportunities for me to acquire more wealth exists." Edith licked her lips and said in high spirit. "Please repeat after me word for word. Do make sure to speak clearly."

Chapter 866: Smashing a Glass

Things took a sharp turn after Edith's second question.

Four nobles were escorted out of the crowd by the new King's guards.

The crowd began to stir.

"Your Majesty.. what..?"

"Hmm, you guessed right. The four of them were telling the truth," Roland said with his hands laid out. "Their courage and their willingness to try earned them the qualification to come aboard my wagon. What we need for a reform, is people who dare to try" He then turned to the chosen nobles, "Do your best. Don't waste this opportunity that has landed in your hands."

"Yes, yes... Your Majesty!" the four nobles said, feeling somewhat flattered.

"Nonsense!" George could not help but growl in his heart. "Courage? Qualification? You must be kidding! Those guys are nothing but Barons who are on the verge of going bankrupt. They are title to nothing but barren lands with pathetic yield, poor management, and a lack of manpower. The output of their lands can barely make ends meet. So of course, they won't have a problem giving up on their lands. The lands under these "nobles" are but symbolic. Upon losing the lands, they won't even be invited to the banquet. People like them actually got the new King's special attention? Or... perhaps they've colluded with Roland Wimbledon to put on this absurd show?"

"Wait a minute..." He suddenly recalled an unsettling story that came from the King's city not too long ago.

There were only a few witnesses to this story about Prince Roland. It was said that after taking over the King's city, the Prince held a trial in the holy palace for those great nobles. Judging from

the result, almost all the nobles who had controlled real power in the King's city had been swept away. Even Timothy was not spared. He had been sentenced to death. Rather than a trial, it would be more fitting to call it a purge.

The proceedings of the trial were extremely bizarre.

He heard that Roland had convicted the nobles with a Q&A game.

The nobles had been asked to answer ten questions. If they responded to any question incorrectly, they would be sent to prison—it was said that this seemingly ridiculous rule was due to mind reading.

Back then, George didn't heed this rumor any mind and had considered it a story fabricated by the nobles who had luckily escaped punishment to conceal their guilt and cowardice. He firmly believed that this so-called mind reading was just Roland judging the nobles based on his personal preference as he would never spare the former king's ministers.

But now, George was not so sure about his original judgment anymore.

"Could... the rumors be real?"

"Here comes the third sentence. Listen carefully," Edith's voice sounded once again, "I have no intentions of giving up my land and power, but in front of overwhelming power, I wouldn't want to lose my life over them either." She gestured to the crowd. "Now your turn."

The atmosphere in the hall changed.

Those who initially repeated after Edith carelessly were now filled with mixed feelings after they saw the first batch of nobles being escorted out the crowd after earning the new King's recognition.

This time, even the timing of the responses were off.

Yet the guards still picked out more nobles.

To George Nery's surprise, Earl Delta was also among them.

"What's going on?" Guye quietly moved to George and asked with a low voice. "Does this mean the new King has persuaded them?"

George did a head count. Altogether, 21 nobles had been chosen, among whom a few actually discussed with him the plan to fight against Roland not long ago. Without those nobles and their servants, the crowd was downsized a half.

"Im-Impossible. If Roland had contacted so many of them, I would have noticed." George gritted his teeth. "They must have been chosen on the spot."

"Then... why didn't they say so?" Baron Levitan also scooched closer to George. "That guy Huth was still with us in the beginning!"

"What?" George glared at him. "'My lord, you have wronged me. My lands are more important than anything else. I'd rather die for it'. Would you say something like that?"

"Um, I..."

"What an idiot." Georgy thought angrily . "The point here isn't the nobles who are being chosen, but those left behind. Roland Wimbledon could just close his eyes and pick anyone as his follower, then suppress those who are left behind. But how could he make sure those who support the Lord of Redwater City instead of himself aren't left behind?

If he chooses wrongly, it will only push those who have supported him to the opposite side. Such a trick has no other meaning than giving the nobles a warning. Or, could he just wanted to show off his mind-reading skill?

Looking around, once again George made sure that the new king only took six guards with him. Even though only one or two nobles were left behind and the new king wanted to punish them as a

warning to the others, these six guards most likely would not be enough to control the crowd.

At least, he and Earl Tririver would not sit idly by and do nothing.

"Submitting before power is nothing to be embarrassed about," smiling at the second batch of chosen nobles, Roland said. "Since ancient times, the powerful have ruled the weak. Being able to size up the situation correctly and act correspondingly is no less commendable than having courage. Your ancestors were able to take over a spot for themselves in Graycastle and even continued their bloodline instead of getting forgotten through the passage of time. This achievement alone is a proof of their capability. I'm glad to see that you all have inherited their wisdom. Moreover, I promise that you won't be treated differently from the previous batch of nobles. I only hope you remember what you said today. When you have to make similar decisions in the future, just make sure to keep in mind the might of Neverwinter."

Then he looked at the Pearl of the Northern Region. "Next sentence."

Edith nodded. "The fourth sentence—I don't want to give up either of them and I don't know which to choose."

This sentence was very short. However, from amongst the remaining nobles, only five or six of them repeated it; most of the others chose to be silent, perhaps because they had noticed that they were being differentiated.

Among those who repeated, the guards only chose three.

"Ahem. Your Majesty, we believe that you can read minds. So let's call it off now."

"Yes. After all, this is a welcome banquet. You see..." Earl Delta and Earl Tririver tried to appeal to the King one after another.

"There are fewer neutrals than I've imagined." But Roland acted

as if he did not hear them. "Being irresolute and hesitant can't actually be counted as positive characters, especially so when facing the tide of reformation. But you still belong to the category that is reformable. Why don't you guys stay here for now? You will probably change your mind in a moment."

He paused, then said to the remaining nobles, "Here comes the last sentence, but I'm guessing that you already know what it is about. In this case, I'll spell it out for you myself—"

"No matter what, I'll not hand over my lands or power. For this purpose, I am willing to take a risk—as long as I can defeat the King, my house and fortune will live on!"

In a split second, the hearth seemed to sway without any wind.

Nobody in the hall dared open their mouth. The air felt icy cold.

"It doesn't matter even if you don't speak. As I said before, this isn't a suggestion but an order," Roland spoke slowly. "People who don't repeat will lose their qualification to get on my wagon. Your road ends here."

"What do you mean?" George scowled. "How can you convict us without any evidence or a proper trial?"

There were still 27 nobles remaining, which was far more than George had expected. According to their titles, each had two to four attendants with them. So altogether, there were more than 60 people left, some of which were probationary knights. "What good would it do for the new king to corner us like this?

Doesn't he worry about backlash from the nobles?

"Your Majesty, if you're just kidding, I think it's already gone far enough." Guye still managed to keep his kind face and said patiently, "Your last sentence carried the joke too far. We can't say it out. How can you be sure that's what in everybody's mind? At least I myself will never betray the Wimbledon Family."

"That's true... I'm wronged. I've never thought about anything

like that!"

"Your Majesty, please reconsider your words!"

The nobles were shouting out their pleas one after another in loud voices.

"You know what? Mind reading works in such a way that the more you talk, the better it becomes" Roland was not swayed. He took over a crystal glass from Edith. "You can save your words for the shovels and ores."

"O-Ores?"

"That's right. You'll be escorted to the North Slope Mine to labor for 20 years in punishment for your conspiracy—after all you haven't actually acted against me," the new king then spoke in a dangerous tone, "but... if you resist my verdict in any way, your conspiracy will become treason. When that happens, you'll be sentenced to death."

Roland drank the wine in his glass with one gulp, then tossed it.

The glass traveled along an arc before it fell at George's feet, where it shattered into pieces.

"Arrest them!"

Chapter 867: A Meaningful Smile

Insane, this guy is... absolutely crazy!

George Nery could hardly believe that the relation between the Redwater nobles and the new king would deteriorate to the present state. He just could not understand why the king would assume that the nobles would allow themselves to be seized without putting up a fight.

The new king brings only six female guards to fight against more than 60 people. Does he really believe that his guards are as hard as nails?

Though he's supported by the witches, they can't guarantee victory in front of the nobles that are wearing the God's Stones of Retaliation!

Immediately after Roland gave an order, one of his guards went to the door while another one stayed with him. The remaining four all drew their daggers and approached the nobles step by step.

All the nobles and their men unsheathed their swords. None of them wanted to put down their weapons and surrender to the king when they themselves significantly outnumbered the king's guards.

"Your, Your Majesty!" The lord of the Redwater City looked pale. "Everybody calm down. If you've any issues, we can discuss it!"

Unfortunately, it was too late. George exchanged a knowing look with Guye. They decided to change their plan and fight in this villa!

Although this place was hard to defend, it was still good for them to take action here since most of the Redwater nobles were gathered in this villa today. George believed that seizing Roland here would quickly swing them to his side—just like Prince Roland had said, strength decided everything. But unfortunately for the

prince, the Redwater nobles were the more powerful side in the Lakeside Villa.

"I can't accept it!" Guye shouted and then walked out of the crowd, holding his sword in his hand. This seemingly amiable man looked irritated now. "I can't say anything if this is a judgment based on valid evidence. Please excuse me for being blunt. Nobles should never be trifled with. Even if King Wimbledon III himself had asked me to do this, I would have refused him! Your Highness, you forced us to act this way!"

All the four tall guards following Earl Tririver held their heads high, stood unyielding and unafraid in front of the new king. They seemed to be more impressive than the king's attendants.

"Well done. Being a noble himself, the royal prince can't deny this high-sounding rhetoric. It's both inspiring and provocative. Now, all we need to do is catch Roland and we will have the final say!" George thought to himself.

The new king would surely not have expected that this old man with gray, grizzled hair would turn out to be an excellent fighter.

Guye Yurianne was born with supernatural strength. At the age of 15, he had led two knights and managed to eliminate a band of robbers based near the river estuary. When he had reached young adulthood, he had mastered all kinds of weapons and had been unrivaled in the fighting matches between the nobles. Some people called him "Guye the Giant" and firmly believed that he would have been remembered as one of the strongest knights in history if he had not been born a great noble.

Moreover, each of his four servants qualified as a probationary knight. If they were engaged in combat with the king's guards, Roland Wimbledon would not be able to escape from Earl Tririver by himself.

"Go and help him, and keep an eye on Miss Edith," George told his attendants.

"Yes." A few more people stepped out of the crowd.

Guye strode toward Roland who smiled even more merrily now, seemingly undisturbed by the ongoing tension. The earl could not help but clench his fist and thought, "Go ahead and laugh. This is your last chance to be arrogant. Next, you'll be so shocked that you can't even cry out your fear!"

"Attack!" Guye dashed forward and struck his sword at the female guard beside Roland when the earl and his men were only ten steps away from the new king.

His strike was so powerful and fast that people around even heard the whistling sound of the sword cracking through the air.

No one could dodge this attack. It could only be blocked!

Once the guard evaded it as they had expected, Roland would be left unprotected.

"Clang——Sizz——"

George heard two consecutive sounds. The former was a clear, melodious collision sound of metal weapons, and the latter sounded like a blade cutting through flesh. A piece of broken sword shot into the air while spinning and then got thrust into the wooden floor.

Soon the head of Earl Tririver hit the ground too.

It slid smoothly to one side and then fell from his neck, bouncing twice on the floor before stopping. The blood from the wound left a bright red trail behind it.

What... happened exactly?

Did someone just behead Guye the Giant and break his sword in half with just one strike?

How's it possible?

Before George recovered from the shock, the crowd began to stir. Clashes of swords and awful screams were everywhere—the

broken sword was like a signal for the four female guards to simultaneously launch their attacks from different directions and start this bloody fight. George was terrified when he realized he could hardly follow those guards' movements through the naked eye. Their strength was very impressive too. Anything in their hands could be used as a lethal weapon. They were nothing like human beings and could even hurt people with just their fists and fingers. The nobles felt as if they were fighting steel warriors!

"Monsters. They're are a group of monsters. No mortal body can be that strong!" he screamed in his heart.

"But... if you make any rebellious action, your conspiracy will become concrete facts. When that happens, you'll be sentenced to death instead of ending up in the mine."

He suddenly remembered the new king's words.

It was like a bolt of lightning flashing across his mind.

Maybe he was waiting for this moment?

He turned his head with some difficulty to look at Roland Wimbledon.

An unstoppable chill crept from the soles of his feet up to his spine—at this moment, he finally understood the meaning behind that smile.

This is definitely a trap!

The new king deliberately left the First Army outside the city except for about 100 guards and took only six guards to this banquet. He pretended to be tough and uncompromising only to lure us into attacking him!

He threatened to send us to some mine. No... he lied and had no intention of letting the remaining nobles live. He would have been really disappointed if we had decided to surrender.

That's it... that's a smile of expectation.

He was waiting for us to walk into his trap step by step and was amused to see us digging our own graves. This is a vicious smile. That's why I can't sense even the slightest bit of happiness in this cold face.

"Spa-Spare our lives..."

"Your Majesty, I surrender!"

"Me too. The Levitan family pledges their allegiance to you!"

"I'll give you whatever you want! Please spare me!"

The situation was deteriorating rapidly for George. Though the remaining nobles still significantly outnumbered the king's four female guards, they knelt down to beg for mercy as they were the ones that seemed to be at a disadvantage.

George dropped his sword helplessly. The nobles had already exposed their intention to rebel and overthrow the new king the moment they had drawn their swords.

Disobedience, discontent, fear and anger kept going back and forth through his mind, and then all the feelings dissolved into nothingness when a long sword struck him on his back.

The sounds of fighting and begging faded away. The last scene he saw was a sloping hall and a pool of blood that rushed toward him.

Chapter 868: The Black Pearl

"This feeling... is so great."

Edith took a deep breath while savoring the tang of blood in the air.

She was intrigued by the panic spreading among the crowd.

The God's Punishment Witches were rapidly tightening the ring of encirclement. The so-called resistance lasted only for a short period of time. For the Taquila survivors, these nobles were no different from the common people that had no titles, and they would never hesitate to kill these self-satisfied common people who had no magic power.

Edith was clear that they killed those nobles because another common person ordered them to do so.

She was also confident that under the influence of this common man, these God's Punishment Witches would also follow her commands, even though she was just a common person like him.

This was the charm of power.

Through bonds and negotiations, a common person could manipulate people's interests, goals, desires and aspirations to create a force which was much more powerful than his or her own strength.

When the last rebel was struck down, No. 76, Phyllis, dropped her sword which had many breaches now and reported to Roland. "Your Majesty, the filtering procedure is completed."

The floor was littered with over 60 corpses. Their blood solidified into dark red blocks, looking like red wax in the flickering light of the bonfire.

There was a dead silence. All the remaining nobles clenched their teeth and were afraid to make any noise. None of them wanted to

become the next corpse. All the three "unsteady" nobles had already collapsed to the ground and were trembling with fear.

Even without Nightingale, Edith herself could guess the replies of the remaining nobles if they heard the same question again at this moment.

Fear was a guarantee of loyalty.

And none of the nobles killed in the filtering procedure was innocent. During the first half of the banquet, Isabella had wiped out all the effects of their God's Stones of Retaliation in order for Nightingale to use her lie-detecting ability. By doing so, she could make those nobles believe that Roland had a mind-reading skill.

The biggest mistake of the dead nobles was that they had overestimated themselves.

These great nobles who had wielded absolute power over thousands of subjects turned out to be vulnerable in the face of greater power. The new king took back over half of the domains around the Redwater city through this fight. As compared to such a great achievement, Edith thought her success in eliminating the two great noble families in the City of Evernight was not worth mentioning.

Fortunately, this plan worked. His Majesty had shown her enough trust, and the witches had followed her commands. The king had even adapted all the five statements she had composed without changing a word.

The only thing different from her original plan was the glass cup he had tossed.

She did not understand why His Majesty had insisted on sending the signal by dropping the glass. Judging by common sense, she believed that this step would have been unnecessary, since this action would have been noticed by the enemy and the sound of it would have been drowned by some other noises. She had doubted

this decision and had considered the preparation of the wine and glass as a waste. However, together with the lie about Roland's mind-reading ability, she realized that smashing the glass had indeed constituted a mystery atmosphere which had really scared the nobles.

She had to admit that the king was better at tactics.

She licked her lips in excitement.

Choosing to serve Roland Wimbledon was really a right decision.

With this thought in mind, she could not help looking at the king and was hoping to share with him the joy of success. However, she failed to find any excitement in his face and could even see a vague attitude of exclusion and boredom in his eyes.

"Is there any other banquet hall in this villa?" Roland asked in a deep voice.

"The-There's one next door," said Earl Delta, swallowing hard.

"Let's move next door. I've something to say." He nodded. "As for these insurgents, please ask your men to count and make a name list for me. I want to see this list, tonight."

"Yes, Yes... Your Majesty!"

"By the way, please open all the doors and windows in this hall and get rid of these dead bodies as soon as possible. This smell of rust is really disgusting."

"I'll send my servants to take care of these things right now!"

"I see." Pearl of the Northern Region thought in her heart. "The king was not looking forward to this massacre. What he desires is a city managed by a well-operating City Hall when the nobles relinquish their power. For the king, killing is just a more effective way to intimidate the bystanders as compared to sending the rebels to the mines. Now it seems that he doesn't like killing and even gets disgusted by the smell of blood."

Her excitement suddenly died down. She even started to doubt herself...

Was my plan too cruel?

If I had killed half of the rebels inside the hall and the other half outside, would it have looked any better?

Though it was largely a matter of personal preference, she was still afraid that such a difference in attitude between her and the dominator with regards to killing would block her advancement in Roland's government.

When everyone moved to the hall next door, the new king finally stopped knitting his brows. He cleared his throat and said in a cheerful voice, "Don't worry. Only the insurgents would be severely punished and their rebellion has already been suppressed. Now the top priority is restoring the order of the Redwater city and I need your help to do this."

"Your Majesty, please let us know what you want us to do!"

All the nobles knelt down together.

Roland nodded with satisfaction. "Please get up. This is the first task I am giving you. Now that you've returned your manors to the kingdom, it'll be meaningless for you to stay in your previous domains. I hope you'll gather in the Redwater City. This includes letting your freemen, serfs and their livestock immigrate to the city, and not just the members of your mansions."

"But... Your Majesty, where can we find enough food for those people if they all move to the city," Earl Delta felt that he had no choice but to voice his objections. "And we don't have that many fields around the city, if you're planning to make them work the land. I'm afraid that we may cause famine and riots if we drive them into the city..."

"First of all, you'll get new wheat seeds called 'Golden Twos'. The yield of this kind of wheat is ten times higher than that of normal

wheat. Secondly, what Redwater city can't accommodate can be moved to the Western Region. I'll take in all of them, no matter how many they are."

All the nobles gasped in astonishment.

"Ten, Ten times higher?"

"Is there really such a kind of wheat?"

"But our subjects..."

Roland interrupted, "When you give up the fiefs, those people will naturally no longer be your subjects. They can decide to stay or leave by themselves. The efficiency of land usage in the past was too low, and all your lands were sparsely populated. A domain which was nearly 7 square kilometers could only support several thousands of people at most. Such a widely dispersed population is extremely inconvenient for the implementation of policies. Therefore it's inevitable to compress and move the people into certain big cities. I know you're still uncertain about the reform, but I can tell you it's the exact reason for the prosperity of Neverwinter. Don't worry if you still don't know what to do. I'll send some people here to teach you how to profit in the upcoming change."

"Teach... us?" Earl Delta stuttered.

"Yes, some officials who've been well trained in the City Hall of Neverwinter will come to build a new administration system here to replace the former lords and manage these regions for me. You can join them to gain power and status, but by doing so, you can only get limited salaries. Alternatively, you can seek opportunities in the development of mass production to create endless wealth for yourselves, but if you choose to do so, you won't be allowed to interfere in government work and will have to follow all the government decrees and finish all the tasks given by City Hall." Roland explained slowly. "You don't need to make a hasty decision. This managing department will be set up tomorrow. You can

consult them first before making a decision, but keep in mind that whichever choice you make, you'll achieve much more than the value of a piece of land."

Half an hour later, the nobles started to leave the hall.

Roland heaved a sigh of relief. "Now the situation in the Redwater City is stabilized."

"And next, we're going to the Silver City and the old king's city. We've finished the filtering procedure in the latter, so all we need to do is send some officials to manage it," said Edith.

"I wonder how everything's going in the Eastern Front." He looked out of the window and saw a bright moon hanging in the sky and the glassy surface of the lake shimmering with silver light. "If nothing goes wrong, Iron Axe will arrive at Valencia tomorrow."

"Ugh... probably," said Edith. When thinking about what she had told Iron Axe before the battle and how the king had reacted to the bloody killing today, she felt her heart suddenly skip a beat. She was somehow unsure of herself now.

"I hope that everything goes well." Roland shrugged. "Go back to the Adviser Department. You still have lots of work to do tonight."

According to the plan, after getting the name list of the insurgents, the First Army would go to clean up these rebels' domains at night as quickly as possible. That was why the troops had been stationed outside the city.

"Yes... Your Majesty, I'll excuse myself." Edith replied absent-mindedly.

"By the way," he suddenly spoke when she was at the door of the hall, "your plan was very clever. Good job."

Good... job?

Did I hear that right? His Majesty didn't mind what I did.

At that moment, Pearl of the Northern Region felt an unprecedented sense of gratification.

She suddenly realized that her worries were completely unnecessary and this was actually a correct choice for her to gain greater power. As His Majesty did not like these devious plans and tricks, he needed someone like her to do this stuff for him.

This was exactly the part she was adept at.

Edith bowed her head to salute the king and then quietly walked into the darkness.

Chapter 869: The Eastern Front Offensive

"That's Valencia?" Iron Axe adjusted his telescope and was observing a city which looked gray and brown in the distance.

"It should be Valencia according to the map. After all, there's only one Sanwan River. We can't get it wrong," said his lieutenant, Bearpaw. Like Iron Axe, he was also a former hunter living in Border Town and among the first batch of Roland's militia soldiers.

"It looks a little weird..." Iron Axe frowned.

"Why?"

"Valencia is a major city in the Eastern Region and a well-established trading center of Graycastle. Together with the old king's city and the Eagle City, they formed the most thriving Central Region of the kingdom. I heard about its name even back in the Southernmost Region," said Iron Axe, "but don't you think it's weird we've seen very few merchant ships here these days?"

"I've no idea about this," Bearpaw shrugged his shoulders and said. "The previous pirate attacks might have terrorized the merchants, so they might not dare to come here to do business again."

"The attack happened two years ago. No matter how much damage it caused, the merchants should have recovered from the shock by now."

The city wall looked mottled and bloated. It seemed to have been thickened recently, but probably because of the lack of stones, they just plastered up the original brown wall with some red mud mixed with a lot of gravels and wooden materials, making it look like the early rubble wall in Border Town. In addition, the surface of this city wall was covered with a layer of glittering things. Because of the distance, Iron Axe could not clearly discern what they were.

However, it was obviously not a comprehensive reconstruction of the city wall. The plastered wall sections now were twice as thick as the old wall, but some other parts still remained the same as before. Looking from a distance, it seemed rough and bumpy and looked nothing like a construction of a city famous for its wealth.

"Who cares. No matter what, we must occupy this city." Bearpaw fished out a fire lantern fruit and threw it into his mouth. "His Majesty ordered us to capture the whole Eastern Region, so we have to seize every city we see in this region, even if it's not called Valencia."

Hearing that, Iron Axe helplessly shook his head. Bearpaw was still a short-tempered person as he had been in the past. Once he had set his target, he would go for it with a javelin in his hand, and when he had returned with his capture, the other hunters would still be busy with setting traps and sending hounds to stalk their preys. It had been said that even the most ferocious animal in the forest, the black bears, would have been reluctant to confront him. That was how he had gotten his name Bearpaw.

Iron Axe believed that Bearpaw would have been promoted to a position higher than a lieutenant if he had learned to use his brain. Even Van'er was already the commander-in-chief of the Artillery Battalion.

Bearpaw continued. "But what matters isn't the battle itself but how to restore order after it. If we mess up the Eastern Region, City Hall will certainly find fault with us. However, if we don't resort to violence, it'll be hard for those officials to control the situation here. Did His Majesty tell you how to deal with these cities?" Iron Axe was a little surprised by Bearpaw's thought.

"No, His Majesty just entrusted me to make decisions depending on the situation."

"That's a real headache for you. But you're the boss here and I'll follow your instructions." Bearpaw grinned.

Iron Axe was intrigued. "Oh? What do you mean by this headache?"

"You really don't know or are you just testing me?" Bearpaw leaned his palm against his brow. "You're definitely going to have a headache when you have to think about how to deal with those nobles. They've held this land for such a long time, waiting for a chance to fight back, but only get to see His Majesty getting stronger. The situation here is complicated. When you seize a city here, most of the nobles will surrender, but without Lady Nightingale, how are you going to make sure they're telling you the truth?"

"Continue." Iron Axe nodded and realized that Bearpaw was not totally mindless.

"Hey, you've really never thought about this?" Bearpaw glared. "This Eastern Front Army doesn't have many soldiers. We can only station a limited number of them in each city we capture, and they can barely take care of the inner city, but this region used to be Timothy's domain! It'll be alright if the nobles are willing to cooperate with us, but what if they're malicious and still think about seizing back the power? Even if there're only a small number of such people, we'll still have no peace from them. Once we leave a city, they'll make City Hall a puppet or even kill the officials we send here. They've many ways to achieve this, such as poison, assassination and bribery. These problems can't be prevented by flintlocks."

"Do you have any suggestions?" Iron Axe asked curiously.

"Boss, that's your business." Bearpaw rolled his eyes and spat out the seeds into the tumbling river.

"Let's assume that now you're the commander-in-chief of the Eastern Front Army. Come on, let's just talk about it hypothetically."

"Well..." Bearpaw thought for a long time and then heaved a long

sigh. "There's no perfect solution to this problem. If Lady Nightingale can't come to help us, we can only count on time to solve this issue. Or we can hire more Rats and take some preventive measures. We can follow the example of Neverwinter and build a police team to preserve the order. Meanwhile, we must use as less local nobles as possible until the end of this war."

"Sure enough..." Iron Axe whispered.

"What?"

"No, nothing." Iron Axe put the telescope away. "Now you can go to inform the people on the other boats to get ready to land. We're near the suburb's wharf."

"Got it!" Bearpaw was thrilled to hear that a battle was coming. "I've been floating on the river for too long. Now, I'll finally get to be in combat here!"

Seeing his lieutenant leave excitedly, Iron Axe exhaled relaxedly and leaned over the porthole in the command room, lost in thought.

He could not help but recall the scene where Edith had had a talk with him before he had left Neverwinter.

The place Edith had arranged for this talk had been a private room in Evelyn's tavern, which was not a place for formal discussion. Iron Axe had expected that Edith, an official of the Ministry of Defense, would have congratulated him beforehand on the success of this military action, trying to build a good personal relationship with the army. However, when he had come into the room, he had seen no one else but Pearl of the Northern Region herself and had heard from her something totally beyond his expectation.

What they had discussed was exactly the problematic thing mentioned by Bearpaw.

Iron Axe still clearly remembered everything Edith had said.

Back then, he had been stunned by her first sentence. "Do you know why His Majesty let you command the Eastern Front Army?"

"I only obey his orders and never ask for the reason."

"But orders don't include all the details for an action, especially those which could not be exposed." Pearl of the Northern Region had said slowly while sipping her Chaos Drink. "You thought you were chosen because you were the most suitable one. But is it true? You know the guys in the Eastern Region better than me. Any well-trained regular army consisting of 500 or 600 soldiers can defeat them like crushing dry weeds and smashing rotten wood. In other words, any regular battalion commander will be enough to cope with the battle in the Eastern Front. By contrary, the Western Front Army has to fight against the Holy City of Hermes. The combat there will be more complicated and dangerous. If it had not been for something special about you, the king would have asked you to help him in leading the Western Front Army and found someone else to command the Eastern Front Army."

"..." Iron Axe had been lost for words at that time but had somehow agreed with Edith in his heart.

Edith then had explained further. "As for this special thing about you, it's simple. That's your attitude toward the nobles. As a Mojin man, naturally, you won't fear or tolerate the Graycastle nobles, and dealing with the rebellious nobles is the key to recapture the Eastern Region."

Just like Bearpaw, she had also analyzed the situation for him. Her analysis was so detailed and convincing that he had to agree that ordinary methods could not stabilize the situation in the Eastern Region.

His Majesty needs resources of people and materials, and he doesn't have so much time to deal with this bunch of scum.

The only problem is... His Majesty didn't give a clear order for it.

He had raised this question to Edith and she had replied by saying, "His Majesty is a merciful lord and can't give any clear order for this, so he needs us to take care of this thing for him. Besides, he did hint about it. This time, City Hall will send 265 officials to the Eastern Region together with you. His Majesty has spent a lot of money and effort training these officials and plans to send them to manage the region for him. There are more than twice the number of Eastern Front Army soldiers than the officials in this region. You should know the reason for this."

Iron Axe remembered that a bolt of lightning had flashed across his mind at that moment.

Edith had reminded him in the end. "Don't disappoint His Majesty."

Suddenly, a report interrupted his thought. "My lord, the First Army is ready to land. We can come to the dock anytime!"

Iron Axe took a deep breath, and ordered in a deep voice, "Let's land and camp. Get ready for battle."

Chapter 870: Siege

The sounds of brass trumpets came from afar and broke the silence of the noon. The birds in the courtyard stopped tweeting, which seemed like an omen. At this moment, this hall in the castle looked solemn and dull.

Duke Wilion Berger knew that it was the time for the decisive battle.

He moved his eyes from the portrait of the former king Timothy to a set of delicate full armor, which was inherited from his grandfather. He had repeatedly patched and polished it. Each piece of it was soaked with grease which formed something like a skin on its surface.

His family's motto engraved on the right arm armor read "Undying loyalty".

In this set of armor, he had caught the rebellious old duke alive on the battlefield in a rain of arrows. For this brilliant achievement, Timothy had bestowed on him the title of Lord of the Eastern Region.

Although Timothy was gone, the duty of a lord would not be interrupted by this incident.

He made up his mind to keep his honor.

"My lord, Prince Roland's army is approaching Valencia. They didn't carry any big firearm with them." A servant walked into the hall and reported to him.

"Good." Wilion nodded. "Tell the others to get ready. I'll come over very soon."

"Yes!"

He took off his coat and walked to the armor. "Help me put on the armor," he said to his Chief Knight, Galina.

"Yes." She rolled up her sleeves and started to help him change his clothes. Her hands were rough and calloused but now moved slowly and gently whilst removing his clothes. It was hard to believe that these hands could also hold a spear to penetrate armor and stab her enemies on the battlefield.

Whenever he saw her killing whilst in combat, he would be enchanted by that scene.

"Do you... regret it?"

"Of course not, my lord," Galina replied calmly. "The moment you decided to make me your Chief Knight, I made up my mind to stay with you forever. No matter what happens, I'll do my duty."

"But this time, the enemy is stronger than ever. If it's possible—" The duke was interrupted by the belt suddenly tightening around his waist.

"So why did you refuse to ally with King of Dawn, if you think that our opponent is that strong. You even openly kicked his messenger out of Valencia. When the envoy sent this information back to Dawn, the king must have blamed you for being unable to appreciate a favor."

"Tut, I highly doubt whether the City of Glow is able to resist the attack of Prince Roland's troops, and Appen Moya really crossed the line to ask me to provide him harbors and permanent military bases." Wilion curled his lips in contempt. "Is there any difference between him and Roland Wimbledon? The former king granted me the Eastern Region. If I had promised Appen, I would have failed my king."

"So my answer is still the same," Galina said without any hesitation. "The Berger family is not alone in rating loyalty as the top quality, so my lord, please don't say that anymore. It's an insult to me."

Wilion fell silent. A moment later, he said, "Unfortunately, most

nobles have forgotten this point... I see, let's go to war together. Although the enemy is powerful, I won't let them seize Valencia easily. I've been waiting for this battle for a long time."

"Yes, my lord." The female knight smiled.

"Bale!" He shouted out his Clerk's name. "Come here!"

Soon, a bald middle-aged man came into the hall. "My lord, what can I do for you?"

"Write down what I say. After a whole night's rest, the kingslayer Roland Wimbledon's minions plan to officially launch an attack at Valencia today. Duke of Valencia, Wilion Berger, determines to defeat them in the name of the former king, and his brave, loyal Chief Knight, Galina Wynne decides to go with him to the battle with resolution. May the deities bless them." Willy paused. "Surely... if you think this record seems too subjective, you can omit the last sentence."

Bale nodded while rapidly noting down what the duke said on his notebook with a charcoal pen. "I think that it'll be alright if I write down the last sentence, my lord. There's no absolutely objective record in this world. Since I'm Clerk of Valencia, it'll be totally acceptable if my favor goes to this city. This is also a part of the reality."

"So keep it there, but no matter what happens next, you have to faithfully record the outcome of the war, understand?" Willy emphasized. "It's your mission to record the reason and the whole process of this war."

"Please be assured, my lord." The Clerk bowed. "I'll let the people remember this event."

Without a word, Wilion picked up his steel sword hanging on the wall and went out of his castle without looking back.

...

When the duke and his Chief Knight climbed up to the lookout

tower on top of the city wall, the bonfire had already been lit up. Oil was boiling in the pot and emitted a pungent smell. The duke's soldiers were busy going up and down, mounting stones and logs on the city wall.

He had known from the war in the king's city that Roland's most powerful firearm in a siege battle was a snow powder weapon called cannon which could shoot much farther than a mangonel. Unfortunately, Timothy had been unable to produce a similar weapon to compete with it to the day when the city had fallen. But on that day, the former king had managed to send his right-hand man to give the duke the formula for making snow powder and the design and manufacturing process of the weapon. Timothy's purpose was self-evident.

Wilion had invested a lot in this new weapon and meanwhile had also found many weak points in this kind of firearms. First, it was very heavy and needed to be placed on a flat ground to give full play to its strength. Second, it was slow to set up and thus this assembling process needed to be covered by flintlocks. In general, it was more a defensive weapon than an offensive one.

He had done everything in his power to get well-prepared for this war. He had thickened the city wall and installed barbs on it. He had also sent his men to destruct all the roads in the suburb and make all the farmland marshland by flooding them with water from the river. He had erected many hidden stumps in the Sanwan River, making it hard for any big inland river ship to travel in this waterway. These measures he had adapted had totally changed this place in the past two years. Now, it was inconvenient to carry any heavy thing into the city using manpower, let alone carriages drawn by horses.

These war preparations cost him dearly. Without convenient connections to the other places, this city of trade could not be prosperous anymore. The destruction of the farmland had led to a sharp reduction in the population. However, the duke firmly

believed his measures were correct, as now he could not find any cannon in the approaching enemy troops.

They must have realized that they could never drag their cannons here if they did not build a road first.

Next, it was time for a tough battle.

Though Roland's soldiers were equipped with highly efficient flintlocks, they could not hide themselves at the foot of the wall or climb up this wall with barbs on the surface. Furthermore, the duke had set four mangonels and two cannons in the city, which could hit target 1000 steps away. Now it was difficult to tell who was winning.

"They're coming," Galina warned.

A group of soldiers dressed in brown stepped out of the enemy troops, steadily heading toward the gate of the city. They did not move very fast but their steps were exceptionally firm. Soon they seemed to be unable to stay in formation on the muddy ground and then split into groups of two or three, starting to work in the fields like old farmers. They carried on their backs dark gray long spears and barrels as thick as thighs. The duke thought that something so light was obviously not a kind of cannon.

Wilion estimated the distance, raised a red flag and waved it to the soldiers behind him.

"Huge rock cannon, fire!"

Chapter 871: An Extraordinary “Cannon”

A thick tendril of dark gray smoke rose from either side of the city wall, accompanied by two huge booms that shook the entire floor of the lookout tower. After the loud noise subsided, a gale of cheer came from the bottom of the wall. Apparently, their first strike significantly boosted their soldiers' spirits.

But Wilion knew that was all that the first round of firing could make.

Judging from the locations of mud splash in the field moments later, he knew he had missed the target. Neither of them had hit the enemies, but they actually landed pretty far away from the default landing spot set in the previous exercise. The shell bounced up after its landing and rolled over for a few meters, leaving a ten-meter shallow groove in the muddy battlefield.

As it was a breezy day today, he had to have a few trial shots before he could accurately hit the target with the huge rock cannon.

Wilion knew very well that the culverin in Roland's army was way better than Valencia's cannon, although the latter cost a ton. The gap between them was even more unbridgeable than that between the flintlocks.

The biggest defect of the huge rock cannon was its non-portability.

The cannon barrel had cost all the bronze wares they could find in the city, and they even melted the ancient bell on the bell tower to prevent the cannon from exploding. After numerous experiments and tests, they forged a cannon with a barrel wall as thick as a man's arm, so heavy that no wagon could support its overwhelming weight. They had no choice but to build a specific turret to place the cannon. A strong rope was used to control and adjust its firing angle and direction, and it took them at least 15

minutes to load the weapon.

What was worse was that the spherical shell made of granite did not create as much as damage as Roland's cannon had done when he had attacked the king's city. Wilion had tried shells filled with snow powder, but their performance fluctuated. As the outer part of the shell was made of iron, the production rate was low as well. He wondered where Roland found so many materials.

So the Duke had decided, from the beginning, to do their best to prevent his enemies using cannons.

He believed that as long as they forced the enemies to approach the city, his cannon would eventually manage to hit them.

Roland's army halted after their first firing, appearing to be shocked by Wilion's expected attack. They started to retreat until they were about 100 paces away from the shell's landing spot.

"What're they doing?" Galina asked, puzzled.

Wilion raised the telescope, through which he saw the enemies, about 100 men, who had taken their equipment off their backs and started to dig in the ground. It seemed they intended to create an empty space in the field.

"I guess they must be afraid and plan to reorganize the troops to have a prolonged battle." A viscount who watched the battle at the lookout tower with them said, "It's rumored that Roland Wimbledon abandoned all the knights and has formed an army of uncivilized farmers. He did not suffer any setbacks in the previous wars because of his fine firearms. But now he must be very hesitant to launch an attack at our defensive line. You turned soil into mud. What a nice move, my lord."

"But our incomes have reduced drastically, and we lost many squires as well," another man said, frowning. "Many people fled in the Months of Demons of this year, abandoning half the workshops in the city. I suggest it'd be better to negotiate a truce

with Roland Wimbledon."

"We have to win an equal position before jumping into a negotiation. Let's just win another battle first."

"Shut up, all of you," Wilion said agitatedly. "I'll never bend to the kingslayer. If you would like to sacrifice your noble titles and betray King Timothy, I'll lock you up with the nasty mob in the cellar first."

That silenced everyone instantly.

Such a great price had Valencia paid to prepare for this battle. The former trade center had not only converted to a stronghold, but Duke Wilion had also bent his rules as well. However, in his opinion, all the sacrifices would pay off. If Prince Roland had decided to form an alliance with nobles to rule Graycastle in the first place, he would have been defeated long before. In fact, the prince intended to overthrow the entire feudal system and have full control over the kingdom, a monstrous decision that would outrage the whole high class. This bold move actually gave him a perfect reason to resist.

If he could thwart Roland's army this time, the other nobles would change their minds and support him in keeping in charge of the Eastern Region. Meanwhile, more protesters would emerge in Graycastle. He would say that it was not only a battle for King Timothy but also a defense for the feudal system.

"Huge rock cannons are loaded, my lord," a servant reported.

"Are we going to keep firing?" Galina asked.

"No, hang on... it was hard for our cannon to hit the enemies now unless we add snow powder." Willian shook his head. Now he regretted his proactive strategy a little. He had thought that an early firing would help to finish the adjustment earlier, but he did not expect the enemy to halt after seeing their first firing. Now the sight of the enemies busy in mud gave him a disturbing feeling.

The 100 men, dividing into a dozen teams, shoveled and created an empty space that could merely accommodate two people. It was unlikely that it was prepared for camping. After the cleaning, they started to fiddle with those green long barrels.

Through the telescope, Wilion could spy the enemy's every movement. It seemed that the long barrel was only a component supported by a tripod beneath it and was padded with a concave iron plate at the bottom. Other than that, a few sticks were strangely attached to the barrel. All the parts were separately carried by a different person, but it only took those men less than 15 minutes to assemble all of the components. How ingenious the design was!

However, the Duke almost could not believe his eyes as he saw what happened next.

A spindle-shaped can was put into the barrel before a puff of white smoke ejected out of the mouth of the barrel.

As the nobles were wondering what that thing was, all of a sudden, a dozen dark red fireballs blasted on either side of the city wall, followed by a series of thunderous booms.

As the houses close to the inner side of the city wall had been replaced with all kinds of traps and obstacles, the explosions did not cause much damage, but the mighty scene gave Wilion an ineffable shock.

At that moment, there was only one voice left in his mind.

"That is a cannon? Really?"

How can it be?

The Duke had not witnessed Roland's cannon troop, but he had heard so much of it. The cannons they equipped could categorized into two types based on their lengths: one portable type that could be placed on a wagon, and the other must be transported by boat. Nither was, however, light enough to be carried by ordinary men.

It took all the craftsmen and materials in Valencia, and two years to forge the two cannons that barely worked. Wilion admitted that it all attributed to the lack of techniques and experience, but he believed that the principle they had applied was no different from Roland's. He was confident that with a few more years, his craftsmen would surely be able to make similar weapons.

But what happened in front of him totally blew his mind.

How could such barrels with such thin tubes bear the enormous pressure generated by the explosion of snow powder?

"It doesn't make any sense!"

"Replace the rock shell with half a bag of snow powder!" Duke turned around and growled to his servant. "Fire right after you finish loading. 10 gold royals for one man you shoot down."

The servant was a little uncertain. "Half a bag? My lord, that may destroy the cannon..."

"If we let them strike our wall without any defense, the huge rock cannon will be useless!" Wilion grabbed the servant's collar and said, "Do as I say! Now!"

That was when another cloud of white smoke rose from where the enemies were stationed.

"How could they fire again within no more than 30 seconds?"

This time, Wilion heard a soft buzzing, like birds' singing or the whistling sound when arrows pierced the air.

"Whew——"

The next moment, several blazing fireballs soared on the top of the wall. Scalding heatwaves spread and knocked down the bonfires and the oil basin. Within a blink, the wall was ablaze.

Chapter 872: The Last Charge

In the end, these huge rock cannons never managed to fire for the second time.

The Duke had built these six tall firing platforms within the city walls to provide a clear view for the cannons and the mangonels. As long as the platforms were higher than the walls, no enemies will be able to escape the weapons' firing range.

It should have been a sound strategy, for such a commanding view would not only improve the accuracy and the range of projectiles, but it would also provide overwhelming pressure to the besiegers.

But faced with the might of Roland's army, these imposing platforms served no other purpose other than being live target practice for the opposing army's cannons.

These fifteen minutes felt like an eternity for Wilion.

The thunderous sounds of explosions never ceased on top of the wall.

Just as Wilion's men finally managed to load the snow powder, a cannonball from the enemy landed on the platform right next to them.

At that moment, it was as if a radiant sun emerged on the platform, growing in size as it engulfed the huge rock cannon as well as over the 20 unfortunate men who were by its side. The blazing flame then spread out in all directions, and the shockwave swept throughout the city. Dust clouds rose up and blew everywhere.

A large chunk of bronze was blown away by the explosion and crashed onto the stone wall of another platform before falling directly on top of a group of workers who were transporting rocks. The weak and fragile human bodies were instantly pulverized into

a cloud of red mist. The bronze chunk rolled twice after it hit the ground, running over those who were lucky enough to survive the initial crash, leaving a thick trail of flesh and blood behind. The victims who only had their limbs scrunched still lingered on with their last breath of life, letting out agonizing cries, hoping for the mercy of a quicker death.

However, Wilion's attention quickly moved away from the tragic scene below.

The lookout tower upon which Wilion and the nobles were standing on equally stood out in the enemy's line of sight, and since the enemy's first barrage turned the city wall ablaze, those nobles no longer dared to watch on and immediately evacuated. This was obviously the best move, as the enemy's rate of fire was far beyond their expectations. It took the enemy no more than 30 seconds to reload, and each shot was more accurate than the last, turning the areas near the city wall into no-man's land.

At first, the fireballs were only impacted the outside of the city, but soon they started to go off within the walls. The explosions engulfed the tall platforms and the city gate. The air inside the city was dense with smoke, cannonball fragments, and dirt, while the constant blasts combined with sounds of wailing made the situation in the city resemble a scene from hell.

By the time the enemy stopped firing, the six platforms had been completely destroyed, and the city gate was breached.

The Duke's men should have, as had been planned, immediately put down the iron barriers or lowered the heavy stone gates to block the passage and prepared to hold the line. But after witnessing such horrifying firepower, it was impossible to continue to have them stand their ground. The flames spread everywhere as it followed the oily liquid, and charred bodies began to litter the city wall. Even if someone had managed to survive the downpour of fire and explosions, their courage would have already been thoroughly crushed. As for the civilians who were hastily

drafted? They were simply out of the question.

Those who were still capable of escaping were long gone, abandoning the rest who were either frightened out of their wits or severely wounded.

Although Wilion had thought of the possibility of defeat, he did not expect it to happen so quickly.

Their defense line crumbled before they even had a chance to touch the enemy. "What... has Roland been doing in the past two years?" He could not help but wonder.

"My lord, there's... no way for us to fight back..."

"We'd better surrender."

"Indeed my lord. Surrendering does not mean we are giving up forever. There will always be other opportunities as long as we stay alive."

"He's right. We could bide our time and rebuild our forces as long as they stay in the Eastern Region."

"Even King Timothy wouldn't blame you if he was here. You've done your best, and the enemy was just too overwhelming."

Wilion remained silent for a moment, before turning to look at Galina.

The woman's face was streaked with two black marks, and part of her hair had been burned by the flame when she had tried to block a burning beam that crashed down to protect Wilion during their evacuation. Even so, her eye shone with the same kind of brightness that she has always had, without the slightest trace of frustration or embarrassment. "I'm at your command, my lord," She said.

The Duke took a deep breath before saying, "You all should surrender."

"My lord... What about you?"

"I did not prepare for these two years just so that I can surrender in the end," Wilion said slowly. "I will have Roland understand that his almighty army cannot conquer everything, and I need to show him that King Timothy's feudatories are not all cowards who would bow beneath a tyrant. Galina, where are my knights?"

"They're all standing by in the second ambush area," Chief Knight said decisively.

"There's no need for an ambush. summon them to the city gate." Wilion gave the command. "Viscount Ariburke, disable all the previously placed traps."

"Disable them? But why?" the nobles asked in surprise.

"Those simple tricks aren't going to help us hold back the enemy. We might as well let them in and confront them fair and square. Things have already come this far, and someone has to face the consequences." The Duke had not expected himself to be so calm in his final moments. However, what he was going to do would be recorded down in the annals of history, and he would then be able to face His Majesty with pride.

...

Half an hour later, Roland's army finally showed outside at the city gate. A small team was first sent in to remove the debris blocking the entrance and also to take control of both sides of the city gate before the main force marched into the castle. As soon as they entered the city, they started to set up a rough perimeter in the middle of the long street. Within a short amount of time, they finished their work and placed two peculiar flintlocks in front of the fortress.

Wilion no longer cared about what the enemy was doing. He softly flicked the reins and led the knights around the corner of the street and formed a single line across the street.

Seven knights and 15 squires—his last counterattack.

At this final moment, these warriors who dared to stand alongside him further convinced Wilion that the system of nobility was essential and superior.

Only the nobles who understand the meaning of loyalty, honor, and duty were brave enough to charge towards the enemy under such unfavorable odds.

Seeing more and more invaders gathering and preparing on the street, he pulled down the visor on his helm, held up his spear, and let out a long breath.

"We may have lost the battle today, but history will remember us. For our names will be recorded in verses and sang in songs. Muster your courage, stand strong, and fight until your last dying breath! Knights of House Berger, on me!"

"To victory!"

Wilion flicked the reins and sent his destrier into a gallop and sped up in the long street, leading his men in this final charge.

Clouds of smoke and the lingering flames around them had perfectly painted the battlefield, forming a scene so serene that for a moment the Duke thought that he could ask for no better place than here to finally rest.

Soon he was halfway to the enemy, and he reached his top speed, but he did not hear the drum-like patter of the hooves that was supposed to come from behind him. As he looked back, Wilion was shocked. The over 20 men that started the charge with him now were now gone with the exception of Galina who rode close after him.

This street was not closed but intersected with many smaller roads and alleys. In that moment, Wilion understood what had happened.

"What... happened?"

He wanted to ask the knight who was charging fearlessly behind

him, but when his eyes landed on Galina's eyes that were filled with meaning and emotion, it seemed as if nothing else mattered to him now.

An end like this seemed not too bad for him.

"At least I have you by my side."

Wilion laughed and pointed his spear towards the nearest enemy soldier.

Before a hailstorm of bullets rained upon him.

Chapter 873: Nobles and Prisoners

As Iron Axe entered the once proud city of Valencia, he was surprised by the devastation that the new weapon had wrought, but he did not let this emotion show on his face.

Even though he had participated in many drills with the mortar, witnessing these weapons in a live battle was a completely different experience.

It was unfathomable how this mobile device that can be easily carried by a group of five people could cause such havoc even with just a limited number of rounds.

He knew that the mortar's rate of fire was much faster than the previous field artillery, and he knew that they can cause large-scale destruction if dozens of them were to fire at once. But it seemed that he had much underestimated this new weapon now that he witnessed it in action.

Even though a single shot of the mortar cannot compare to that of a Longsong Cannon in sheer firepower, the mortar was easier to control, more mobile, and could be transported without the witches' help. Furthermore, its shooting trajectory allows it to attack enemies who are hiding behind walls. With sufficient ammunition, the weapon could give the enemy a barrage so devastating that even the highly disciplined First Army might not be able to withstand if they were the ones on the receiving end instead.

"No... it is only normal to flee under this circumstance. Who wouldn't piss themselves if a rain of fire were to descend upon them?"

Iron Axe finally understood the confidence His Majesty had shown when he threw all those seemingly sophisticated field artillery back into the Furnace Area. To be honest, those weapons that shot out solid rounds at the enemy seemed useless compared

to the mortar.

Well, in the end, probably only King Roland could afford such a firearm in the entire Graycastle.

It was said that each shell cost around three to four gold royals, so what the First Army used earlier by bombarding the city with hundreds of shells was as good as throwing away solid gold. Moreover, the shrapnel used by the Longsong Cannons were far more expensive. By the time they confronted demons, will the gold royals in the Neverwinter's coffer be enough to sustain the First Army until the end of the Battle of Divine Will?

Fortunately, he did not need to worry about this problem.

That hard nut was for Barov to crack, as for the army, their only obligation was to obtain victory for His Majesty.

Iron Axe and his men passed through the long street that was filled with the smoke of gunpowder.

They soon arrived at the center of the city square, where the First Army had rounded up all the surrendered nobles.

Iron Axe's eyes moved over the captives whose appearances were in complete shambles. Before he could say anything, a nobleman stood out and said, "I'm Shipbay Lord, Earl Kasyn. May I ask where King Roland is?"

Valencia was built on a piece of land that was surrounded by water, and many nobles had named their lands with bays and beaches. Iron Axe dimly remembered that Shipbay was a large piece of land sandwiched by Valencia and Seawindshire. A family that held such a superior place should have been admired and awed by his subjects. However, at this moment, the nobleman's raised chin and pretentious manner looked ridiculous to Iron Axe. "His Majesty is too busy to handle the business in the East Region. He entrusted me with full responsibility over this front." he answered.

"You?" Earl Kasyn frowned.

"Is he joking? He is obviously not a person from Graycastle."

"Roland Wimbledon would let a man from the Sand Nation manage his army?"

"How could he not personally lead his army on an expedition as large as this? Was he not afraid that his men would scatter and flee?"

Shipbay Lord was not the only one in doubt. The other nobles were also questioning the new king's decision.

"His Excellency Iron Axe is without a doubt the commander-in-chief of the Eastern Front Army. We can all testify," Lieutenant Bearpaw could not help but cry out.

"Eastern Front Army? What's that?" Kasyn asked.

"It is the army sent to recover the Eastern Region, of course—"

"Bearpaw!" Iron Axe interrupted sharply. The lieutenant, suddenly aware of his mistake, hastily covered his mouth with one hand.

Lady Edith was right. Even though His Majesty was hell-bent on having the nobles relinquish all their feudal power and abolishing nobility once and for all, those nobles still had an influence on the people. Bearpaw, who used to be a hunter, might not look servile in front of the group of nobles but he was obviously affected by these nobles' titles, or he would never have made such a basic mistake.

It seems only Iron Axe can maintain indifference in front of these highborn.

Iron Axe then said in a low voice, "Believe it or not, the truth won't change. Why are you the one asking the questions? Where is the Duke of Valencia? Isn't he the person in charge of the Eastern Region?"

"The Duke has sacrificed himself in the battle," Kasyn shook his head with a look of grief. "He insisted on leading the knights in a head-on charge. We couldn't stop him."

"So the rider who was riddled with bullets was the Duke!" Iron Axe raised his eyebrow. "He's definitely qualified to be called a warrior." He looked at the nobles who was still armored and asked, "But my men only reported two defenders. Where's the so-called knightage? How could it be that there's only one knight serving the Warden of the Eastern Region?"

"Well, this..." Kasyn was speechless for a moment.

"Stop concerning yourself over those irrelevancies. Now that we know you're the head of the army, we will just tell you our request." Another nobleman stood out and said, "We would surrender and serve Roland Wimbledon only if he meets us personally, or if His Majesty is too busy to be here, we could also send messengers to him."

"And you are?"

"I'm Viscount Ariburke," he said impatiently, "Till then, we hope to be treated properly. If it's a ransom you want, simply say the amount."

"But what you've done is treason," Iron Axe said, emotionless. "Even your titles won't spare you from a trial."

"First of all, Duke Wilion Berger was the one who committed treason, and he has already paid for it. We didn't ask to be here, and according to the law, our crimes should be less severe."

"Exactly, we're not his feudatory, but we're just under his jurisdiction." Kasyn seemed to have come to and echoed, "Secondly, His Majesty should be the one giving us the final verdict. Don't tell me you are planning to sentence us yourself?"

It did not take long before Iron Axe realized why those defeated nobles still put on airs. When they noticed that Roland Wimbledon

was not here himself, they became less interested in negotiating. It was common practice for the punishment of the defeated to be given out by the King. In their opinion, the so-called sentence was less of a punishment but more of a business transaction. In general, those who failed to pay up would be eliminated, and those who could pay would be able to get off relatively scot-free.

It was probably not their first time facing a defeat, so these nobles were confident that they could offer up something of interest to the King as ransom.

Unfortunately, the King Iron Axe served is no ordinary noble.

Iron Axe shrugged before saying. "You're right. I don't have the authority. But be as it may, you are still traitors who have committed treason. Before His Majesty reaches a decision, I will have to detain you until my King has summoned you."

"How long will it take?" Shipbay Earl said unpleasantly. "And just as we said before, we haven't done anything that could be called betrayal in the eyes of the law unless you can show us some concrete proof."

"At most a month considering the speed of carrier pigeon." Iron Axe gave a rare laugh, ignoring the Earl's second half of the sentence. "Rest assured, the food and clothing will all be up to the standards that you deserve."

...

Late at night two days later, Bearpaw, panic-stricken, dashed into Iron Axe's tent.

"Something happened, my lord! The castle's dungeon is on fire!"

Chapter 874: Men of Sin

Despite the fact that there were numerous functioning wells around the castle, the servants were still unable to control the flames. The fire started without any notice, and by the time people outside realized that something was wrong, thick columns of smoke already filled the whole interior of the dungeon and held back any potential rescue attempts.

The First Army promptly retreated out of the castle and sealed off the area. The fire lasted for hours, and by the time most of the smoke had finally dissipated, there was already nothing left of the prisoners previously held inside.

Without delay, the First Army started to clean up the scene and investigate the incident. The officers who came with the army set up a temporary City Hall and began to take over the administration of Valencia.

Soon they found out the cause of the fire: a group of Rats had sneaked into the dungeon through a secret passage and ignited the stacks of wheat on account of their resentment for Duke Berger who turned this once prosperous trade city into a husk of its former self.

Therefore, this was an egregious arson, a significant threat to the order of the Eastern Region, and an act of open defiance to the First Army of Neverwinter.

Apart from propagandizing the investigation result, the First Army and the City Hall started a city-wide operation to root out the Rats; leniency to those who confessed, punishment to those who resisted, silvers for those who reported, grains for anyone with information. Moreover, the food liberated from the mansions of the nobles was recirculated back into the market and was also used to succor the starving. The previously near-dead city now regained its vitality.

The night the command to exterminate the Rats was given, Bearpaw entered Iron Axe's tent once again.

"Chief, we've spotted some signs of the evacuation of the big families. A dozen carriages exited through the West City Gate, seemingly heading for Seawindshire. Some of the furrows left behind by the carriages were particularly deep, so I think they must be loaded with..."

"Gold and jewelry." Iron Axe put down the quill in his hand. "I've made myself clear at the start that I will only want their food, so they can take anything else as they wish."

The commander-in-chief was not at all surprised when he heard about the nobles' hasty evacuation.

The moment the dungeon was on fire, any trust between the First Army and the nobles had crumbled. At that point, fleeing this place was, in their opinions, the only way to survive. A noble family could bear losing its lords and some knights, for the title could be inherited, and more knights can be accoladed, but they have already lost the courage to confront the First Army directly.

Instead of staying here to wait for their inevitable demise, they had much rather take the remaining family members, servants, and fortune to somewhere far away in hopes of new opportunities. Their lands were very important, but naturally, they much more cherish their lives.

Also, to prepare for battle, Wilion Berger had gathered all the nearby resources to Valencia, thus leaving the surrounding lands in such a sorry state that it would take at least two or three years of hard work before they were of any value again. Otherwise, those nobles would not have made up their mind to turn tail and run away so soon.

"Chief, I have one more question..." Bearpaw paused, his next words frozen on his lips. This was very rare for the simple-minded lieutenant.

"Go on," Iron Axe said seriously.

"Were you the one who set the dungeon on fire?" Bearpaw hesitated for a long moment before he asked this under his breath.

"What makes you say that?"

"The secret tunnel was designed with a partition door made of solid iron that was far beyond a few Rats' skills to open. Also, I don't think our stationed brothers were so lax that they would be completely unaware of the arsonists. I've checked the dungeon, and the burning marks suggested that the fire was more likely to have started in the corridor rather than in the cells. Lastly, from the look of the burnt wreckage, I believe the blaze was fueled by oil."

"You're right. The fire was set under my command." Iron Axe nodded.

Bearpaw, who was startled by his boss's unreserved confession, was stunned for a while before he found his voice again, "Why?"

"I think it's better that these kinds of things are left for me to handle. The more people that know of the plan means a bigger chance for something to go wrong."

"That's not what I mean." The lieutenant shook his head. "I mean... didn't they already surrender?"

"I see..." Iron Axe meditated for a moment and said, "To be frank, I don't have the time to discern whether or not they were sincere in their surrender, nor does His Majesty has time to judge one by one. This is why His Majesty had given me full control over the Eastern Front before the army left Neverwinter."

"But..."

"Are you going to tell me that a sentence without a trial may kill the innocents among them?" Iron Axe said brusquely, handing his lieutenant a book on the desk. "Have a look."

"Is this a... demographic report?"

"Yes, we found it in the library." The chief nodded. "Five years ago, 220,000 people were living in Valencia and the surrounding lands. It was the most prosperous area in the Eastern Region. But by this year, the population has dropped to a mere 60,000. The refugees we've taken in from the Eastern Region are about 30,000 to 40,000 people in total. If we round it up to 40,000, the deficit still stands at about around 120,000 even without considering the growth in population. I believe you are aware of the cause for this."

Bearpaw gasped. "The farmlands that were ruined by floods..."

"And they have also distorted Valencia beyond recognition." Iron Axe arose and walked up to the candlestick, his hands on his back. "Wilion apparently called up all the people who lived nearby to work for him. They were sent to block the roads and reinforce the walls. He alone should never have been entitled to this kind of authority. This would never have been possible unless he was backed by someone more powerful or, even worse, assisted by the other nobles. As a result, the massive dislocation of people had severely interrupted trade and left much of the crops unattended to. In other words, all those nobles are accomplices of the Duke. Now, do you still believe that His Majesty will accept their allegiance?"

Bearpaw was dumbfounded for a moment.

"But they did not lie about believing in their innocence," Iron Axe continued, "For all they care, what they've done was no big deal. Even with half of the farmlands ending up being devastated, their mansions were still crammed with food, and even... human. After all, meat can save for longer than wheat when properly stored."

Bearpaw's pupils suddenly contracted.

"To put the cherry on top, what they've done critically hinders the progress of His Majesty's plan. Our king values the population more than any other resource, but they squandered their human

resources wastefully. Can you imagine how the battle would have turned out if we didn't have the mortars with us? You know how difficult it is to move the field artillery in the mud. We would have had to resort to storming the city or prolonging the battle. I don't think the nobles would have yielded before they used up all their people had we not have come prepared." Iron Axe turned around. "Any other questions?"

For a long moment, Bearpaw kept his head down. Finally, he glanced up. "You're right. It would be too merciful to let them just burn to death... But His Majesty didn't give this specific command, did he? What if he hears of..."

"What do you mean 'what if'?" Iron Axe raised his eyebrow. "Do you think that I'll hide this from my King? No, he'll know. I've included everything that has happened in Valencia so far in the report for him, and I'll take full responsibility regardless of the outcome."

Chapter 875: Objective History

The chaos that he had expected in Valencia did not come in the end and the situation completely exceeded Bale's imagination.

Having worked as a clerk for several lords, he naturally knew what the breaching of the walls meant—plunder, massacre, disorder, exile... whether the intruders were knights, mobs, or pirates, it did not make much of a difference. That was the case with His Majesty, Timothy, and also with the ascension of the new Duke.

The city's food and wealth were the best rewards for intruders. This had always been the norm, just like nobles who were born to be superior to the common people.

This was recorded in the history books numerous times, proving its credibility.

However, this time the situation was completely different. Roland's army not only spared the city people's lives, but also tried to comfort and calm them. The piles of wheat that were found in the Duke's castle were cooked into oatmeal and distributed to the hungry people. A large number of job offers were posted in the main square, which stated that the participants could not only get food but also salary! Didn't Roland's soldiers mind giving out what originally belonged to them to a bunch of people they did not know? Did Prince Roland come all this way to conquer Valencia only to squander his own treasury?

Within the records of all kinds of books, Bale had never seen such a behavior before.

Still, all this just made him a bit surprised. But there was something else that actually made the Clerk feel a deep fear.

And that was the castle fire several days ago.

The rumor that the fire was set by the Rats had many loopholes.

Bale had served three Dukes and lived in the castle for more than 20 years, yet he had never found the entrance of any secret path.

When it came down to life or death situations, the design would have been very secretive and safe. This way, even people on the inside would not be able to discover it, not to mention those from the outside. If those rats actually had the ability to discover something like that, they would have never degraded to Black Street Rats in the first place.

That fire must have been set by Roland's people.

Once he realized that, Bale felt a sudden grip on his heart.

For the first time, nobles were no longer more important than common people. Their lives had the same value as those who lived within the city walls, without any insurance anymore.

Maybe in even more danger.

As for the big families that had also realized that and had not yet been apprehended by Roland, they swiftly reacted and escaped Valencia. They probably even left the Kingdom of Graycastle.

So, what would happen next?

Would something like that also happen to him?

In the past few days, the clerk had lost a bunch of hair and the bald spot on his head had grown bigger.

His fear was not without reason because, in the past 10 years, he had been called a noble without a title, or more accurately, the closest a civilian can be to a noble. He had served several lords, had plenty of experience, knowledge, and had read many more books than normal people. It was exactly because of that, whether it was Garcia's sacking or Eastern Region's change in power, he had safely survived both. Even if the people in the city were killed like the straw being cut in the field, he still observed and vigorously recorded those events.

But now, he was too afraid to even fall asleep.

Even though the formidable army had not acted against any non-noble so far or even against those common people who had worked for the big families, he still was not certain whether they would not do anything in the future.

He could not ask those families to take him with them since he was a common man after all, but he also did not want to just stay and wait around. He felt he had to do something.

Under the swaying candle, the Clerk's gaze turned to the unfinished history book about Valencia.

Thinking about all the stuff he wrote, Bale couldn't help but feel a chill down his spine.

That's right, I almost forgot that...

He quickly turned to the last page, tore it into pieces, and burned them until each and every one of them had become ash.

No, this is probably not enough.

Bale thought for a moment, then took out a quill and prepared to write.

"No matter the consequences, you must record the truth. Do you understand?" Duke William's words sounded echoed throughout his mind.

Of course, he would record the truth, even now.

This was a Clerk's duty.

But in this world, nothing was absolutely objective. He was now living in a city governed by Roland. So, being a little bit biased was not strange. In other words, this was also part of being objective.

Bale took a deep breath and started writing.

"The ambassador sent by the great King Roland Wimbledon arrived in his loyal city of Valencia today..."

Outside of the City of Redwater, at the camp of the First Army.

"Your Highness, there is a secret letter from Eastern Region."

Nightingale jumped out of the Mist while holding a grey Goshawk in her hands. The latter tugged its claws towards Roland and grunted with dissatisfaction as if complaining about the letter being too heavy. There were six notes tied on its paws, almost covering both of its feet. Only when Nightingale handed out a bunch of grilled fishes, did the carrier pigeon finally calm down.

Well, this could not be considered a secret letter anymore.

Roland opened the six densely written notes one by one and had a quick look at them. They were sent by Iron Axe and they were mainly focused on the post-war summary and the situation reports.

The first part was exactly the same as he had expected. The Eastern Front Army had easily occupied Valencia. During the battle, the mortar's effect was significant. Faced with the firepower of the twelve-pound field artillery, even though it was a siege, the enemy still had no chance to fight back.

But when he read the last part, Roland was a bit surprised.

"What happened? Did something happen there?" Nightingale asked.

"Well... not really a problem, it's just a bit strange." He passed the fifth note to her. "Look here."

"Burning the dungeon where the nobles were imprisoned?" Nightingale immediately found the key point after a glance. "This wasn't your order?"

Roland shook his head, "No, I told him that he has full authority at the battle of the Eastern Front."

"So... what's strange then?" she asked confusedly. "Since he has

full authority, any measure he takes should be acceptable, right? Not to mention that those people had ulterior motives anyway. They still haven't surrendered to you after so long, so apart from sweeping them up, we could also use this chance to clear the Rats. Seems like a double win."

"You're right..." Roland said while stroking his chin with his hand. Deep in his heart, he still felt this approach was too soft. The Eastern Region was the Second Prince's home for a long time. Seizing the city was only the first step. The following political battle with the surrendered nobles would be a key point in achieving full control of the city. It's for this reason that he had arranged over half of the novice officials trained in the City Hall to go to the east and had appointed Iron Axe, who was from the Sand Nation, to be the commander of the Eastern Front Army and deal with the complex intricacies of the relationships with the nobility.

He believed that after occupying Valencia, in order to eliminate the enemies, Iron Axe would almost certainly use his interrogation techniques to the fullest. When it came to the Mojins' torture, even the High Priests of the church were not able to resist, not to mention those weak nobles. Through bloody trials and executions, he would destroy their power step by step and establish a new order.

However, setting a fire directly was not Iron Axe's style at all.

Roland thought for a while and decided to leave this matter alone for now. Once the two armies met, he would find out more about it —after all, just like Nightingale said, the result of this fire was far too good. It made the nobles fear for their lives, leaving the territory en masse without caring about their lands anymore.

At this speed, Seawindshire and the rest of the domain would be under the complete control of the City Hall within a month. At first, he had thought that the Eastern Front situation would last for a while but, unexpectedly, it had even surpassed the Western Front's progress.

Chapter 876: Silver City

Roland shrugged, it seemed that he had to work harder. Being overtaken by his own subordinates was never something to be proud of.

Thankfully, Redwater City was now back to normal. Out of the remaining filtered nobles, 70 percent had decided to continue doing their previous jobs while the rest wanted to try their luck at the City Hall even though the basic requirement to apply for the administration exam "literacy of sentences" was easy for them. Roland still believed that after the final tests, these people would not have too much of a chance to become official members.

After all, it was hard for nobles to change their habits.

But certainly, becoming a normal clerk was much better than losing your head.

There were even three nobles who wanted to join the First Army. They were knights originally and when being observed by Nightingale, they did not conceal any evil thoughts. However, he still stood by his original decision and refused their applications.

Having solved the issue of the feudal power, the work efficiency of Redwater City and the surrounding areas had greatly improved. In just over a week, more than 20,000 people had boarded the ships for Neverwinter, whilst more and more people continued to arrive at Redwater. At first glance, abandoning the small towns and villages seemed to decrease the amount of land they could control, but in fact, it drastically increased his capability to control the City Hall.

In such an age where even roads were scarce, the implementation of government decrees in the countryside was something he could only dream of. Arranging a few leaders within the course of a year was rather doable, but asking them to go around implementing the decrees was quite difficult. Barov had asked him more than once

why he persisted in sending people to Neverwinter, instead of unifying the kingdom and leaving everything as it was. He had never fully answered him.

It was because the City Hall Director could not imagine how many people could actually be absorbed by the compounded industry of coal and iron, nor understand how much energy and time it actually took to build such an industry.

And the most important part was that those remote territories could not operate effectively and thus, from the perspective of resource utilization, keeping them would just be a waste.

Thus, it was more suitable for the current situation of Graycastle to gather the population in several major cities with convenient transportation.

It was from that moment of land reform that Roland finally acquired jurisdiction of the Redwater area.

As for his next target, that was Silver City.

Compared to the huge City of Redwater, the old king's city district was much easier to deal with. It was originally a common city, not much different from the several cities encircling the king's city. However, its existence became more special when the first silver mine was discovered there. As more and more precious mineral veins were being excavated, the city became busier and busier, and eventually reached its current size.

Considering the great importance of Silver City's output to Graycastle's economy, the latest Lords were only appointed by the family of Earl William, the "good old man" who was loyal to the Wimbledons. In addition, their power was also restricted and in the next couple of years, the city was almost never allocated to other nobles.

In other words, as long as the lord of the city declared it, Silver City would always be a thing.

Roland believed that "persuading" the other side was not a difficult task, considering he was the descendant of King Wimbledon III and the most suitable heir to the throne.

However, he was somewhat concerned about the fact that the city, which was built on mineral veins, was Nightingale's hometown.

Every time he asked her about it, he would get the same answer "I have cut my ties with the Gilen Family, so you don't have to worry about my feelings." He still felt Nightingale was hiding something, but because of his busy government affairs, he did not have much time to think about it so he could only leave this be for now.

Four days after receiving Iron Axe's secret letter, the First Army of the Eastern Front Army entered the Silver City territory through the canal.

...

It was almost the same with the trip to Redwater City. Earl William led his platoon out of town to greet them and after a warm greeting, he followed up with a dinner invitation. The difference was that in Redwater City, they were welcomed by the city's nobles while in the old man's platoon, there were more merchants, including their old acquaintance Hogg.

That evening, the Earl's opening speech set the tone for the feast. He was willing to hand over his feudal power and fully supportive to His Majesty Roland's new government. A warm applause sounded immediately at the meeting and the latter swallowed back the words that he had prepared to say.

And through Hogg's efforts, the feast became a business fair.

"Aren't you always asking me how the machine in my mine operates?" He talked proudly in front of a bunch of merchants. "Its real inventor is currently standing in front of you—it's His Majesty Roland himself! This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. You don't

even need to go to the Western Region. You can get the answer directly here in Silver City!"

The merchants immediately swarmed over.

"Your Majesty, could you tell us why its power is so strong?"

"If you're willing to sell more rail systems, the Daymond's Chamber of Commerce is looking forward to working with Neverwinter."

"Your Majesty, do you remember the Fastsail Association? Two years ago, we provided you with several sailing ships to transport refugees from the Eastern Region—in terms of trade strength, we're definitely one of the best Chambers of Commerce in the Central region. If possible, the Fastsail Association wishes to buy a complete set of the manufacturing equipment for a steam engine. And naturally, at a very generous price!"

Remembering the "good news" the female merchant Margaret had revealed to him, Roland did not know whether to laugh or cry—"Hogg will bring a large number of merchants to the Western Region". Unexpectedly, he had actually met them beforehand.

The world would have been such a nice place if everywhere in Graycastle was like Silver City.

After satisfying the merchants' curiosity, he finally found a chance to speak privately with the old lord.

They walked through the hall and went to an open air balcony, temporarily putting behind the buzz of the party.

Roland held his wine glass and after staring at the city for a long time, he finally said, "To hand over your city power like this, aren't you feeling any regret?"

"It was never actually mine to keep, so what's to regret..." Earl William smiled. "Your father, as well as his father before him, though they never said it clearly, they would have never allowed Silver City to have its own cluster. And it's a rule for the William

family to never have their own cities. As far as I'm concerned, this power isn't so important." He paused for a moment."Not to mention that I don't actually need this power."

"You don't need it?" Roland could not help but ask curiously.

"The actual reason for the city a province is to expand and consolidate your power to prevent others from looking down on you. But Silver City does not have this risk—anyone who wants to attack this city will blatantly provoke the authority of the Wimbledon royal family. So as long as my family stays loyal, I don't need to worry about getting attacked." The Earl had a sip of wine and continued, "In turn, feudal power is also in a sense a weakening of your own power—through it, one has to allocate part of his own resources to others in order to gain their allegiance. Compared to giving out these resources to other people, I'd prefer to manage them by myself. Do you know how much the output of Silver City has increased in the past 20 years?"

Roland shook his head.

"As much as 16 times, after all, I put most of my energy into it..." The old lord said with high spirits, "At first, it was just an open-air silver mine, but right now the excavated mineral veins have reached more than 10 different kinds. In addition, at first there was only an excavation team sent by the royal family, but now, not only are there are all kinds of ore and jewel merchants, but also many auxiliary industries have been developed through mining, such as oil lamp, mining shovel manufacturing, etc. Your steam engine can also be considered as one of them, am I correct?"

"Indeed," Roland said with a smile.

"This feeling is like raising a child and watching it slowly grow up. Why would I be willing to split and share it with others? That's why I don't need such a power." After saying that, the Earl sighed. "Your Majesty, do you wish to let me continue managing this city of shimmering Silverlight for you?"

"Of course, if you wish to." Roland lifted his wine glass towards him, they smiled at each other and then touched their glasses gently.

"Oh right," Roland changed the subject after finishing his drink, "do you know about the Gilen Family?"

"Gilen?" Earl William pondered for a while before raising his eyebrow. "I think I remember them but not very clearly—after all, it's been for a long time for a new noble family to appear in Silver City. All those families were here before the discovery of the silver mine. If I remember correctly, the last Gilen must have changed his family name two years ago and his land now belongs to the Somi family."

When he said those words, Roland instantly felt Nightingale's grip on his arm.

Chapter 877: The Long-Forgotten Hometown

"He changed his family name? What happened?" Roland frowned.

"Probably because it's easier to merge with another family than to manage the territory all by himself." William was surprised that Roland was paying particular attention to some petty noble. "It requires a huge amount of money to live a decent life. If one isn't really capable of managing domestic affairs, his domain would be a burden rather than an asset."

"Could it be possible that he was compelled? For example, somebody wanted to take his land by force?"

The earl replied meditatively, "Not... very likely. I've seen them attend some banquets before, although I didn't really talk to them. That Gilen, who changed his surname, seems to be pretty happy with the Somis. I don't see he was forced by any means. If you want to know about this, I can send for Viscount Dott Somi..."

"That's fine." Roland interrupted him after receiving Nightingale's whispery instructions. "I was just curious. Not a big deal. But it appears that the Gilen didn't show up this time?" He thought that Nightingale should have recognized him if his brother Hyde had attended the banquet.

The senior lord clapped his hand over his chest and said apologetically, "That's my fault. I usually stick to our tradition when sending out invitations."

Roland immediately understood what he meant. Even though the Gilen had changed his name and become a branch of the Somis, he was still not considered for a place on the invitation list. Although the booming mining industry in Silver City stimulated commerce and trades, making the city more or less similar to City of Glow in

terms of its livelihood and style, people in here apparently attached greater importance to wealth and power than titles and reputations. William's answer, in a way, also reflected that the glory and pride of the Gilen Family had almost diminished and faded out of people's memories.

Roland knew Hyde had inherited his father's viscount title after the departure of Nightingale.

It was really pathetic to see him be reduced to such poverty.

Roland returned to the campsite. As soon as he shut the tent curtains, Nightingale revealed herself and explained voluntarily, "Your Majesty, you must know that I have no interest in prying into Hyde's business. Ever since I left Silver City, I've severed all relationships with the Gilens. Please trust me... I was just, just a little surprised at that time."

Roland could barely suppress the urge to tease Nightingale when he saw the latter try to convince him with a look of absolute honesty. Nevertheless, he soon changed his mind at the thought of Nightingale's incredible obstinacy, for he did not like to seek trouble. As such, he simply coughed and nodded airily. "I know. You never lie to me in this regard."

"You don't believe me... Nope, you don't believe me at all!" Nightingale retorted immediately.

Apparently, his reply was not quite convincing, for Nightingale had discerned the mocking tone of his remark with her ability. He thus took a deep breath and cleared his mind. Then he looked into her eyes and said more seriously, "I believe you."

This time, it was Nightingale's turn to feel abashed. A rosy blush rose to her cheeks. She immediately looked away. "I was just surprised. I have nothing to do with the person who betrayed me."

Although Roland wanted to tell her that it was normal to show some concerns for her brother, he felt it more advisable to tag

along in this situation. So, he asked, "Why were you surprised?"

"The Somis once had a good term with my father..." Nightingale replied in a low voice. "After my father passed away, they often came to see me at the old Gilen mansion. However, after my family knew I'd become a witch, old Gilen forbade me to see them. I didn't expect that Viscount Somi would adopt Hyde."

Roland, who had lived in this world for so many years, instantly understood the underlying implication. If the two families did have a good term, the Somis should have helped Nightingale's brother revive the house after the decease of old Gilen. Indeed, it was common for a noble to help an heir of a diminished family regain its power. The latter would then return his benefactor with incessant wealth and even further a union through the marriage of their children. It was a kind deed people loved to talk about.

Yet to ask the sole heir to change his surname would be a totally different story.

That meant the end of the Gilen bloodline as well as their viscount title.

Since Roland had determined to forfeit all feudal rights, the noble status did not matter anymore. However, from the point of view of a traditional noble, having an heir change his family name was far worse than stealing his property. It did not sound like something that a family with whom the Gilens had a good relationship would do.

"If you sense something unusual, look into it." Roland sat back at the desk and unrolled a stash of parchment to review the statistics of the local population and the financial status of the local government, a routine task that he always did when visiting a new city. "Sylvie and the God's Punishment Witches will protect me here. I'll be perfectly safe at the campsite, so you don't have to stick around all the time."

Nightingale hesitated for a moment. "But it's the business of the

Gilen Family. I have nothing to do with them..."

"It's your father's domain essentially, so you're more or less involved. Plus, the mansion where you grew up is also within that domain, right? Since we've already arrived here and that the church is no longer coming after you, just take this opportunity to revisit your old abode." "Although all the land now belongs to the kingdom," Roland remained the rest of his words unsaid.

Nightingale appeared to be persuaded by the notion of "the old mansion where she grew up". After a long silence, she made her decision. "OK, but you have to promise to summon me when you want to leave the campground. It would be a quick trip. I'm not going to do anything."

"You got it." Roland shook his head in amusement. He had this weird feeling that he was forcing Nightingale to return to her native town, but he believed the historical issues of her family would only be solved after she confronted them with courage. Avoidance would never help with the problems.

If truth be told, Nightingale was still a little... too young to understand the philosophy of life.

Nightingale left the campsite at dawn. She headed to the east of Silver City along the main street.

She remembered it was a grand mansion. There was a farmland close to the two-story building, vast enough to hide all footprints. A brook, which originated from the depth of the forests, wrapped around the farmland, where she used to hunt for crabs in summer. In the farther east lay a deep ravine, which was where her families had believed a gem mine was hidden. Her family had once promised that they would pick the biggest gemstone down there as her dowry.

Nightingale had not known that her family's domain was actually

the smallest among nobles until she had left Silver City with the Witch Cooperation Association. Their land was pretty much of the same size as the domain of an ordinary knight if compared to nobles in other towns. Since their only water source was this brook, the expansion of the farmland was greatly limited. The so-called gem mine down the ravine was probably a pure dream of her families'. Even if the mine did exist, they would not have enough gold royals for further development and operation.

This place did not change much during her prolonged absence. Although the bushy farmland both appeared to have shrunk a little bit over the past several years, the reminiscence of her childhood seemed to have brought life back to this place, making it as fresh and vivid as ever.

Nightingale somehow started to understand the underlying meaning of Wendy's words, "erasing the nightmares of the old days doesn't mean abandoning the past".

When Nightingale approached the mansion, however, she was astonished.

She had thought the deserted house would be dilapidated, but to her dismay, it was not only refurbished but had also expanded a great deal on top of the original building. She walked through the yard fences and saw many people inside, all poorly dressed, some of them even as shabby as beggars. Several servants were passing porridge to the crowd, and the crowd, from time to time, expressed their gratitude to their benefactor.

Nightingale wondered if they were distributing relief food.

Over the crowd at the end of the yard, she noticed a man standing at the entrance of the mansion, smiling back to the grateful peasants. His attire and every act of demeanor revealed that he was a well-bred aristocratic gentleman.

As Nightingale had expected, the man was her long-forgotten brother.

Hyde Gilen.

Chapter 878: Nightingale's Investigation

Based on the description of the lord of Silver City, the fallen Gilen Family should not have the financial capacity to support peasants. In other words, Viscount Somi was the real philanthropist who had not only helped with the extensions of the house but had also supplied warm porridge to the poor.

Nightingale didn't understand why they had chosen to take Hyde in rather than offer him aid and assistance in the revival of House Gilen as what nobles were normally encouraged to do. Nevertheless, Viscount Somi did not seem like a bad man, she thought. A person who was willing to provide food to people in destitution should be, overall, generous and kind in nature. Further, Hyde, in a way, had also benefited from such a benevolent act.

Even if Hyde was currently in a desperate situation, she would not interfere.

She just wanted to visit her old home and... indulge herself a little bit in nostalgia.

When Nightingale was about to depart for other places, a strange feeling suddenly struck her.

She came to a halt. "Hang on... what's exactly wrong here?"

She surveyed the yard and frowned at the ragged peasants, the servants maintaining orders, the mansion guards, and the noble hosting the event...

Hyde was not wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation, not even the kind of the worst quality.

Through the Mist, she could clearly see Hyde's physical appearance and his clothing. When she rested her eyes on the guard at the entrance, however, she could only spy the scabbard at his heel, since a big black hole in front of his chest blocked her

vision.

Now Nightingale perceived the aberrancy: it was absolutely abnormal for an heir of a viscount not to wear any God's Stones of Retaliation.

Even the guards were wearing one!

She wondered whether it was because Hyde now held an impartial and unprejudiced view of witches, but she soon denied such a possibility. She still remembered the abhorrence with which his brother had said over a decade ago, "I'd rather not have you as my sister. All witches should go to hell and be in company with demons." Even though she could not tell truth from lies with her ability back then, she knew Hyde had meant it. His eyes had betrayed everything.

Nightingale then assumed that Hyde probably could not afford a God's stone. It might happen to a fallen noble, but since Hyde had joined the Somi Family, he should be able to purchase one.

After a moment of hesitation, Nightingale turned around and walked toward the yard.

The moment she passed the mansion gate, she overheard two guards' conversation. Both of them were speaking in a suppressed voice.

"Nobles are so horrific creatures. He's no better than us but just a pup used to please his lordship. Who would know he would turn into a completely different person once splendidly dressed? Is it what his lordship usually refers to as the bearing of aristocracies?"

"Stop the nonsense," the other guard hooted. "His lordship is in the house right now. If somebody overhears us and tells him what you just said, you'll lose your salary this month."

The previous person shrugged. "No need to worry. I have good ears. I'll know when somebody approaches. Plus, I didn't lie. He's truly a pup. Everybody, both downstairs and upstairs, has heard

his lordship bellow at him in a hot red rage."

"You know his lordship is somewhat faulty in regard to temper, and you still try to irritate him." The other guard grunted. "No matter how ill-tempered his lordship is, he's still a noble. What about you? Are you related to anyone who bears a relatively prominent family name? Even the foreman in the neighboring village is more distinguished than you. If your uncle didn't ask me to look after you, I wouldn't have given a damn about what you say."

"OK, OK. I'll shut up... What the heck?" The first guard suddenly stiffened.

"What's the matter?"

"I somehow feel someone just passed us..." He looked around and then murmured. "Probably I'm just being paranoid."

...

Ignoring the guards, Nightingale directly walked through the wall and soon located the viscount's room based on the domain of God's Stone. Normally, the higher one's status was, the better quality one's God's Stone would be. Nightingale had often used this method to locate her target when she had been employed as an assassin, and her method had rarely failed.

When she learned that Dott Somi was in here, she was dimly aware that the food distribution in the yard might not be as simple as it appeared to be.

Apart from the viscount and a fully-armed knight posed as his guard, there was an old man in a robe standing in front of the desk. He looked like a scholar from the old king's city.

"Lord Dott, you shouldn't have yelled at Lord Hyde yesterday. He did submit to you, but your occasional generosity and kindness will help him play his role better."

Dott Somi, who sat in a high backed armchair, whacked the desk

in vexation. "I know, but I can't control myself! It took me decades to get what I have. I was only this close to obtaining the two lands in the east, but a random order from Roland Wimbledon just shattered everything! Did you hear what that old fool said? He's willing to hand over his feudal rights and fully support His Majesty's new policy! Has it never occurred to him that other people may need those rights that he doesn't think he needs? That really pissed me off!"

"Smile, Your Lordship... smile. You vented last night already." The scholar stroked his beards. "Since you're so reluctant to implement the new policy, why don't you refuse to hand over your feudal rights on the spot?"

"Um..." Dott was at a loss for words for a second. He then replied resentfully, "Do you think I'm in a position to defy the king? Even Timothy's royal knightage was defeated by Roland. Do you want me to die on the spot?"

"Therefore, your complaints don't help with anything but only worsen the matter. Such being the case, do you still want to continue with this meaningless grumble?"

"... damn!" The viscount cursed under his breath after a long silence.

"As His Majesty has forfeited nothing but feudal rights, you can follow the example of Earl William. As long as you properly manage your current domain, you won't suffer great losses."

"But without the executive power over the jurisdiction, those greedy patrol team will sooner or later come here. How am I supposed to stop them by then?" Dott shook his head vigorously. "You know what I sell. Once they find out, no doubt I'll be sent to the gallows."

"Then abandon that business," the scholar answered immediately. "I've told you this isn't going to last long. Since you've already raised enough capitals and that the church no

longer imposes any restrictions on you, you can now turn to some regular businesses. Why did you put so many efforts in gaining control of the Gilen Family in the first place? Didn't you want to expand your territory and your authority to be in a more secure position?"

The viscount was apparently having some difficulties in washing his hands of the whole matter. After hesitating for around seven or eight minutes, he finally gave a nod with a flash of heroism. "I see. This will be the last food distribution. After Hyde is done, I'll talk to him personally."

"Don't just suspend the business all of a sudden, as that'll raise unwelcome suspicions. You can still do it for a short while but just tell them not to come pick up orders again."

"Alright. I'll do what you said." After resolving to leave what the scholar called a "shady business", Dott was completely alleviated. He leaned backward in the armchair and laughed aloud. "The two Gilens must have no idea what they've missed. Since they don't know about anything, I obviously become the perfect person to take care of the Gilen Family. I bet Hyde still thinks his parents died in that refugee riot, doesn't he? Hahaha..."

The words enraged Nightingale so much that her pupils suddenly contracted in anger.

Chapter 879: Excuse For Betrayal

Why did Dott Somi mention the riot?

It was true that many years ago, a tragic mine accident had resulted in hundreds of deaths among mine laborers. Since at that time the mine owner had only been willing to indemnify the losses for freemen, his indifference toward those underpaid refugee workers outraged the victims' family members, which had thus led to a huge riot in Silver City. Swarms of refugees had escaped from the mining area in a fury, looting and plundering every residence coming into sight. After an extensive pillage, the riot had finally been quashed by the knightage in the king's city, and peace and order had been again restored.

That was the last time she had seen her parents. It was until she and her brother had been escorted to the old Gilen mansion that they had learned the death of their parents.

But now it appeared that it had not been the case, based on what the viscount had just said.

Nightingale did not expect she would overhear a completely different side of the story decades after the accident. If the viscount was indeed telling the truth, she would have to investigate something other than the relationship between Hyde and the Somis.

Nightingale exited the room quietly. She reached the basement floor and turned on the Sigil of Listening she took with her.

The Sigil was initially to facilitate the communication between her and Roland in the event Roland wanted her immediate return. She did not anticipate that she would use it on such an occasion.

"It did seem quite fishy," After hearing the account at the other end of the line, Roland replied. "So you want to stay at the mansion a little longer?"

"Yes, I plan to ask Hyde in person at night... Perhaps he knows something." Nightingale hesitated for a moment and then apologized. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I..."

"No need to apologize." Roland quickly interrupted her. "I'll wait for you at the camp while you're conducting your investigation. Don't worry, it's very safe in here. As long as I stay in, I'm not breaking the promise. You need to take care of yourself and stay safe. Don't act rashly. No matter what you discover, you have to report to me every four hours."

Nightingale felt the warmth of Roland's words wash over her. After a moment of silence, she replied in a soft voice, "Yes, I understand."

...

When the moonlight faded away outside the skylight, Nightingale left the cellar for Hyde's room. She had confirmed the location of her brother's room earlier. The slant of the moonlight indicated it was a quarter past midnight, a perfect time for her to take action, for most people were in a deep slumber at this hour, and even vigil guards sometimes dozed off in the dead of the night.

Hyde's bedroom was on the first floor of the mansion close to the backyard, a place usually for servants or insignificant guests. This room arrangement further corroborated the testimonies of the two guards. It not only showed that Viscount Dott did not take the heir of House Gilen very seriously but also suggested that all the kindness the Somis had perpetrated in the past was feigned.

Due to Hyde's low status in the household, the entire hall and the hallway were unguarded, which provided Nightingale ample time to escape in case of an emergency.

After entering the bedroom, Nightingale dragged her brother out of bed straight away. Before Hyde completely woke up and realized what had happened, he felt the chill of a dagger around his throat.

"Any screams, cries or wailings will bring you an instant death. You got it?" Nightingale whispered behind Hyde.

Hyde nodded immediately.

"Very well. Now turn around and look who I am."

Hyde soon submitted to Nightingale's order. His pupils dilated instantly after he figured out who the assassin was in the dismal moonlight. If it was not because of the dagger to his throat, he would have shrieked.

But he managed to keep silent.

Nightingale slowly withdrew the dagger after making sure that her brother was tranquilized.

"Why... why are you here?" Hyde could barely suppress the tremor in his voice. "Didn't you die a long time ago?"

The moment Hyde spoke, his words resurrected all the thin threads of her old bitter memories. For a second, Nightingale felt as though she were in the old Gilen mansion again. The revived pain of the betrayal from her own brother and the agony of being abused and used by her remote relatives blurred her vision and perturbed her mind.

This is the person who exposed the most tender part of her heart to vicious strangers.

Nightingale bit her tongue to let the smell of the blood disperse the multitude of thoughts in her head. She asked, "Why did you say that?"

"Because, because..." Hyde swallowed hard. "Timothy searched the entire king's city and the surrounding towns. He announced that all witches were executed. But Veronica, I mean, sister... I don't want you to die. I was shocked at the news at that time as well. I thought if you didn't leave by yourself, you probably wouldn't have been persecuted."

"Veronica..." thought Nightingale. It was a name she had not used for years. However, after years of self-improvement and personal training, she was no longer as gullible as she used to be.

The tremulous magic power inside her body had told her that the latter half of Hyde's speech was a complete lie.

"Why are you with Viscount Dott Somi?"

"Well..." Hyde paused for a second. "After the death of old Gilen, there were constant disputes within the family. I didn't know much about the details, but by the time I was about to inherit the title, there were not much savings in the household. It was at that time that the viscount called on me. He basically didn't leave me many choices." [lying]

"Did he force you to join the Somi Family?"

"Yes. He said if I didn't agree, he would weed me out..." [lying]

"Then what're you doing for him at present?" Nightingale asked nonchalantly. "Are you helping peasants?"

"No." Hyde gritted his teeth. "He's just using me to sell Dreamland Water! There're Rats disguised as peasants coming here to pick up orders. I didn't discover his scheme until very recently!"

The first half was true, while the second was still a lie.

Nightingale found she was not annoyed but actually quite relieved. This was the exact feeling when she normally communicated with strangers. Lies and truth always went together, and people were always treacherous and weaselly. Sometimes, even a blood-related tended to be unreliable and deceitful. Ever since her awakening, Nightingale had been used to the caprice of human nature. Over the past few years, she had developed the ability to grasp the truth out of a bunch of lies through threats and coaxing while remaining unperturbed at the same time.

As such, she actually felt uneasy to speak with Roland sometimes,

for the latter rarely lied to her.

Now, the Shadow Killer who had once made nobles in the Central Region tremble returned.

"What's your plan next?"

Hearing these words, Hyde suddenly prostrated to the floor and implored Nightingale, "Please help me, sister!"

"Help you?"

Hyde crawled forward. "I know I was wrong... but I'm your brother! The viscount never views me as a real noble. You've seen it. He puts me in this servant's room. The renovation of the mansion is just to fool the public. If I continue to stay here, he would sooner or later kill me!"

"So you want me to get you out of here?"

"Get out of here? Then I'll lose everything, won't I?" Hyde shook his head in a fright. He then pronounced his words through his teeth. "You killed old Gilen, didn't you? I don't know what ability you've employed, but you can easily get in here, so you must know how to enter his bedroom. Sister, kill him! Once he's dead, I'll have a chance to become a real noble of the Somi Family. After, after that, you can kill the other successors one after another. By that time, I'll own this domain... and all the properties of the Somis!"

Nightingale looked into his eyes. When Hyde could no longer bear the awkward silence, she ventured. "Before that, I want to ask you a question."

"Sure, sure..." responded her brother instantly.

"Why did you betray me back then?" Nightingale stressed each word with due strength.

Chapter 880: Destitute

The answer came faster than she had anticipated.

"Why..." Hyde did not reply immediately. "Just because you're a witch..."

There was no reaction of the magic string, which indicated that Hyde was telling the truth. In a second, Nightingale seemed to understand many things. The notion that witches were Devil's minions and the representation of the Fallen was so permeated among the public that people no longer viewed a person as a human being once she turned into a witch. The dehumanization process had thus further given rise to an alienation between the brother and sister. The so-called betrayal was simply an automatic self-protection mechanism. Perhaps, Hyde still believed he had done the right thing, and that was why he could blurt out his response so naturally.

Afterwards, Hyde said something else. He reproached himself for his ignorance and claimed that he had not known the rumor about witches was a fabrication created by the church. He also said he had truly repented for his sin and hoped that Nightingale could forgive him. Nightingale, however, could not really register his words, for she was still absorbed in her own thoughts.

So she shouldn't blame Hyde because everyone would have made the same decision under the same circumstances?

For Hyde, he was not betraying his own sister but a demon who would sooner or later lose all her attachments to humanity. Since he thought she was a demon, there was no trust between them whatsoever.

But... is it really true for everyone?

Nightingale thought of another person, although she was currently confronting Hyde.

That person was also a noble. If exposing a witch was a matter of course, he should have sent Anna, a witch to whom he was not related and had never met before, to the gallows a long time ago.

He did not fear witches, nor did he hate them, but was simply curious. His eyes were always so clear that she could always easily see through his mind. He had remained open to her even when she had held a knife to his throat.

All the memories came flooding back. Nightingale then remembered that snowy day.

It was the first winter after their encounter.

"... I don't think she'll die during the Months of Demons."

"Why?"

"She said she wouldn't lose to the Demonic Torture, and I believe her."

"You even believe a witch. We're cursed by demons."

"Really? I believe you, too."

The pictures in her head faded away.

Nightingale took a deep breath and pulled herself back to the reality. "Wait here. If anybody comes to look for you, do what you normally do like I've never shown up."

"Hold, hold on... Where are you going?"

She put the dagger back to her waist and stepped into the Mist. "To do what I should do."

...

Nightingale knew Hyde was right. She could easily invade Viscount Dott Somi's bedroom and threaten him to spit out all the truth with a dagger. Most nobles would lose their minds at the sight of a sharp blade and automatically disclose everything without further coercion. Some stubborn ones, however, might

insist on their silence for a while, but would eventually pour their hearts out after she denied their ten fingers. This was a theory she had developed after years of assassination experience.

If the death of her parents did have something to do with the viscount, she would definitely make him pay with his life.

Yet Nightingale did not want a brutal revenge at this moment.

Especially after she confronted Hyde.

She was now no longer alone.

She had a person she could trust her life with and a person who equally trusted her.

Compared to the traditional method employed by her as a Shadow Killer, Nightingale intended to solve the problem in an alternative way. She believed if it were Roland, he would definitely not want to see her cause so much bloodshed.

Nightingale walked out of the Mist and entered Dott's study. Several pitch-dark black holes, which resembled inky spheres, appeared in the black and white world. Ignoring the dozing guards at the door, she rested her eyes on the domain of God's Stone next to the bookshelf.

Nightingale slowly walked to the wall, and the wall soon twisted and distorted. The outline of the wall curled up like dry, tangled hair, revealing what was hidden beneath.

Through the distortion, Nightingale could perceive the details that eyes of ordinary people could not penetrate. She saw a metal rod hidden in the wall, one end connecting to the bookshelf and the other attached to a "black ball".

It was a very common trap.

Nightingale broke the bell hung below the trap effortlessly. She then picked an ordinary-looking book and pushed it. Without a sound, the trap door was open.

The secret vault was embedded with God's Stones of Retaliation, but that did not pose an issue to her. Before she had entered her adulthood, old Gilen had hired a Rat leader to teach her all the skills that should be possessed by an experienced, cunning thief. After years of training, she had learned every deft trick of burglary, including how to open various lock catches with a copper needle.

After breaking open three or four iron vaults, Nightingale found what she wanted.

It was a recent ledger that kept a record of all the Dreamland Water transactions, including the order number, the name of the purchaser, and the quantity of the stocks for each transaction. As she had expected, nobles tended to hide important stuff somewhere they believed was most secure.

Both the ledger and the stocks in the mansion would provide solid evidence of the viscount's crimes.

Nightingale returned to the basement and reported everything to Roland.

The following day when it was scarcely past dawn, the First Army who had received instructions surrounded the whole mansion.

...

Three days later, when Hyde was just released from the prison, Nightingale came to him again. His frame was emaciated and his countenance expressed a deeper despondence. Wan and lost, he looked like a walking dead. It was the presence of Nightingale that finally brought some color to his cheeks.

There was a tinge of anger and hatred in his eyes.

"Viscount Somi is going to be hanged. His family members were sentenced to 20 years of hard labor. The two domains of his were subject to civil forfeiture. This is what you want me to have?" After

they entered an empty alley, Hyde could not contain himself anymore. He growled at Nightingale, "You snatched everything from me and left me nothing!"

"You should feel fortunate that you haven't been treated as a member of the Somi Family." Nightingale said placidly, "Compared to the viscount, you're at least alive."

"That's because you want to see me continue to suffer, to live as laughingstock! You ruined my life eight years ago, and you did it again now... Do you know what life I had after you killed old Gilen? I finally got a chance to obtain the Somis' lands, and you ruined it! I was a fool to believe you would help me!" Hyde clenched his fist. "Now, I've no title, no land. Are you happy now? You've never forgiven me, Veronica! You're such a liar... you just want revenge! I should have known it long before!"

His hysterical hollering, in the end, yielded to a suppressed sob. He curled up his body and started to weep. "I've got nothing... nothing..."

Nightingale was silent for a while before she spoke, "You're right. I've never forgiven you, and I never will. A betrayal from a sibling is more intolerable than one from a stranger." She paused for a moment and then continued, "But you do have something. At least, I've given you freedom."

Hyde looked up, his face covered with dirt and snot.

"Nobody, neither old Gilen nor the Somis, can manipulate you now. Whatever path you choose in the future, whatever you're doing, they'll be solely on your own decision. You'll no longer live like a puppet as you did in the past. Whether you think it's a punishment or a torture, I don't care. That's your own choice — we're officially done as of today."

With these words, Nightingale turned around and headed to the end of the alley before she disappeared from Hyde's sight a minute later.

Chapter 881: A Hundred Times Yes

The sun gradually sank behind the mountains and forests, gilding the surrounding clouds. The color of the sky was shifting slowly from blue to white then to red. In the end, the last drop of sun cast a crimson shadow on the thick grassland.

At the end of the Gilen Family's domain, there was a bulging slope. Standing on top of it, Nightingale could see her family's houses, farmlands, and forests adjacent to the mountains. When she had been little, she had liked to sit on his father's shoulders and ascended the slope to see the complete picture of their property. When her parents' bodies covered with bruises and wounds had been sent back and her servants had asked where she had wanted her parents to be buried, she had chosen the slope without hesitation.

At the time, she had been extremely upset at her parents' death and had had a hard time believing they were actually gone. She had wished at some point her parents could open their eyes. In that way, they could see her and her brother, no matter where she and her brother were in the mansion.

Now she once again visited her parents' tombstones, but with a totally different attitude.

There was not much dust on the tombstones. Obviously, somebody had been constantly dusting them. Bending over, she put a pile of neatly folded white paper in front of the two tombstones.

It was Viscount Somi's judgment.

Faced with the indisputable evidence, the viscount soon collapsed. After Roland promised his underaged children would not be punished for the crime he had committed, he had admitted his crime of smuggling Dreamland Water and had also confessed the entire process of taking the Gilen Family's properties.

It turned out, beneath the valley that between the two families' domains, there really are buried treasures, although it was not a gem mine but possibly a gold mine.

The one who had discovered it was a farmer working for the Somi Family.

Due to the different geographical positions, what the Gilen Family referred to as "valleys" was actually at the ground floor of Somi's domain. Farmers of the Somi Family had often fetched water and bathed downstream. One day, a lucky guy had found gold dust in the spring water coming down. He had then asked others to help further search for more gold, which had thus attracted Dott Somi's attention.

Instantly, he had prohibited them from spreading the news and sent his men to search for the origin of the gold dust.

Yet the result of the search had greatly disappointed him.

His men had indeed found more gold upstream and they had speculated that the coarse golds in the river had been a result of the sag of rocks caused by constant water erosion and seepage. However, an increasing amount of evidence had shown that the gold ore might be close to the Gilen Family. As such, they had had no choice but to suspend the exploration.

Due to the special status of Silver City, the numbers of knights and supporters local nobles were allowed to own were more or less limited, so Dott could not just take the gold mine. Seeing that he really wanted this huge treasure, he had laid his eyes upon Viscount Gilen.

He had started his plan with old Gilen, a distant relative of the Gilen Family.

He had a simple yet ruthless plan. Considering old Gilen had no title nor manor, he had tempted old Gilen to cooperate him and promised he could make old Gilen the master of the Gilen Family

under the condition that old Gilen would give him a piece of land. Old Gilen could not resist the temptation of becoming a real noble, so he had agreed to help Dott.

Dott bribed the Rats to kill Nightingale's parents during the refugee riot then old Gilen took the chance to take in Hyde and Nightingale and helped to manage their domain. Old Gilen planned that when Hyde entered his adulthood, he would force Hyde to waive his manor and title, which was as easy as pie—after all, an heir without parents was just as helpless as a bird in a cage. If any other nobles had a problem with it, they could only blame old Gilen for being too greedy.

His plan would have been completed, but Nightingale's awakening had sabotaged his plan—on the day of her adulthood, she had killed old Gilen and disappeared into thin air. Old Gilen had never got the title he had dreamed of even in his last moments.

Dott Somi had to alter his plan—he could win old Gilen over, but he could not get everyone's support from the Gilen Family. After all, he had only had one bargaining chip—the title. He had to make the best use out of it.

Ironically, he had turned to Hyde in the end.

When Nightingale had first heard about it, she had found it ridiculous—the thing that was meant to be Hyde's was used as a bargaining chip for Hyde to earn; yet Hyde was naive enough to believe Dott would help him. So he did not hesitate before agreeing to Dott's proposal, the man who had murdered his parents.

With the Viscount's support, Hyde stood out from all his relatives, who were contending for power and wealth, and successfully kept his title of nobility and became the official heir of the Gilen Family. According to their agreement, he would merge with the Somi Family. He had done so not because he had wanted to keep his promise, but because he had had no other choice—after going through internal strife, his family's industry was on the

verge of collapse and most of his subjects had left.

After plotting for 10 years, the Viscount had finally gotten what he had wanted. He had even saved enough capital to exploit the mine little by little by smuggling Dreamland Water. Once the mineral vein was located, the wealth that the Somi Family could gain would last for centuries.

But Roland destroyed his ambitious dream.

For a likely gold mine, Dott had murdered fellow nobles, making several families fall apart... A vicious scheme, which led to the death of nearly 20 people, ended with a noose around his neck.

From beginning to the end, he had not been able to take a glance at the gold mine.

Taking out the flint, Nightingale burnt the judgment paper.

She had heard, from Roland, of an ancient way of mourning, which was to shape paper into the appearance of the item one wished to deliver, burn it, and then the deceased would be able to receive the present. Since a fire could connect spirits, smoke and fire with special wills had a chance to pass through the gate connecting the worlds of life and death, especially at dusk when the two worlds were the closest.

Through this ritual, Nightingale wished to deliver the message that the murderer had been executed to the spirits of her parents. Although Roland also said that he actually did not agree with the idea of the worlds of life and death, she did not care that much.

She was not so much comforting her parents as she was comforting herself.

By the time she walked off the slope, the sky had turned completely dark.

Roland was waiting for her not far away. The moment she saw the familiar figure, she felt relieved and safe.

"Is this really okay? Letting him go unscathed?" Roland twitched his mouth. "I've been longing to teach him a lesson."

"Oh? As who?" Nightingale asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Ahem..." Roland coughed twice. "Of course as a king."

Nightingale shook her head, smiling. "It's over. I'm done with him. If you really want to teach him a lesson, you can send men to take him back and beat him up again."

"Since you've dropped the matter, I'll let him go," Roland said, spreading out his hands.

"Em, right..." Nightingale suddenly stopped walking, knelt down, saluted with her hand across her chest as she did when she had pledged her fealty for the first time. She said, "Your Majesty, could you allow me to always stay by your side and serve you?"

"Why do you suddenly mention this?" Roland was startled.
"Haven't I agreed?"

"Because I want to hear it again." Nightingale insisted.

Roland shrugged helplessly, walked to her side, stroke her head, and said, "Listen carefully—em, Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes... 100 times Yes. Are you satisfied?"

The magic string did not vibrate. Instead, it was as peaceful and soft as the earth under the curtain of night.

I'm so lucky to have met him.

Nightingale curled her lips into a smile and said, "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Chapter 882: The Return of the King

The king was coming!

Since Roland Wimbledon's troops were stationed in Redwater City, the discussion over this event filled the streets and alleys of the old king's city and reached its peak when the Lord of Silver City submitted to Roland. Although a fraction of people repeatedly emphasized that Roland did not ascend the throne, compared to his previous titles as rebel king and invader, most of the civilians still believed that the future King of Graycastle was none other than Roland. A coronation was probably the exact purpose for this trip.

The new king did not seem to be in a hurry as he stayed in each one of the cities for several weeks. By the time he made his way toward Redwater City, it was already mid-summer.

The increasing temperature did not decrease people's enthusiasm, however. Taverns were still full of voices talking about Roland's inauguration; main streets were decorated with colorful ribbons, houses over two stories near the palace were all leased out. The desolate old king's city seemed to have been restored its former glory. Perhaps only during such occasions the citizens in the city were reminded of the style and features a king's city should have.

It had been over a year since Roland last stepped onto this piece of land.

The moment he walked through the city gate, pedals collected by the local girls covered the sky; cheers from the audience instantly ignited the city—they were not praising the new king's wisdom and benevolence, it was merely a habit of the people here.

Nini and Pod were among them.

The two of them happened to live in a tower building close to the

main street, which offered them the best seats that overlooked the entire scene. Their parents were too busy serving potential tenants to stop them, enabling them to freely climb to the top of the tower, lie on the red-brick roof, and watch the grand occasion of the army going into the city.

"Here they are... Is that His Majesty standing in the carriage? He looks so much younger than the Second Prince," Nini shouted with surprise. "Wow, look! He's waving at us! Lord Timothy would never do that!"

"He's waving at everyone in this direction." Pod shrugged. "We climbed so high. There is no way for him to see us."

"We're also included in everyone, am I wrong?" Nini said righteously. "Judging by his appearance alone, he looks much nicer than the Second Prince."

"So the nice king hanged a big batch of nobles, including His Highness Timothy—his biological elder brother. The temporarily constructed gallows are still standing in the square. He must be the ruler who has killed the most people in the king's city, even if you include the Rats."

"Hey, why do you always talk contrary to me?" Nini glared at Pod.

"I don't like him," Pod said with a pouted mouth. "He's never taken this city as his home. He advocates that in Western Region, there are more working opportunities and encourages people to go there, but what about us? Nowadays the number of customers that come to father's tavern has reduced by half. Isn't he the one to blame?"

"So who do you like? The Second Prince?"

"I disliked him too. In order to catch witches, he caused turmoil over the entire city... The old king is the best, at least he wouldn't
—"

"God! Look at the girl next to His Majesty!" Before Pod finished talking, Nini had put aside the topic they were discussing. Pointing at the carriage the king was standing on, she cried out, "She's turning back. Oh God, she's so beautiful!"

Pod had no choice, but to sigh.

Her discovery seemed to have attracted the crowd's attention—if one could ride on the carriage with the king, the significance of that person was self-evident. Discussions in the streets got hotter. Obviously, people were full of interests toward this strange yet pretty girl.

Suddenly, Nini and Pod heard a clear, peculiar roar.

Before they realized it, a gray figure, like an arrow shot from a bow, dashed in front of them and went directly into the tower building. Downstairs, a series of sounds followed as panic shouting, someone falling on the ground, and wine glasses smashing to pieces filled the air.

"What was that?" Nini asked in surprise.

"I've no idea, but it seems it came from our home!" Pod hurriedly stood up. "Let's get back and take a look."

"Ok!"

They climbed down the brick wall, the same way as they went up, and hopped into the tavern from a window. To their surprise, several armored warriors were surrounding the guests. On the floor, there was sprayed alcohol, water, bowl and cup fragments, and a few feathers everywhere.

The first thing that came into Nini's head was that Pod's complaint about His Majesty was overheard by somebody, and she wanted to muffle Pod's mouth, hide somewhere , and make no sound no matter what they saw.

Yet she could not manage to do that.

In actuality, when Nini and Pod came in from the window, the warriors had noticed these two "uninvited guests". The warriors did not come to arrest them. Instead, they smiled at them. After a few minutes, the warriors went out one after another, leaving Pod's astonished parents and the guests behind. A man who seemed to be the head of the warriors even took out 10 silver royals and put them into Pod's father's hand.

Waiting until the warriors all left, Nini hesitantly went to her parents and asked, "What happened?"

"It was unbelievable," out of excitement, her father answered with exaggerated body gestures, "when the king's honor guards passed by the street corner, a guest suddenly took out a loaded crossbow and aimed at the king!"

Nini could not help but gasp in astonishment. "And then?"

"We were frightened. If that arrow had been shot, all of us would have been in trouble. Luckily, at that moment, a bird, no, a person flew in and stopped that guy!"

"A person?"

"Not exactly. When she flew in she was a bird, but when she hit that guy on the head she became a person—a little girl about your age." A guest then said, "We didn't come back to our normal selves until the crossbow fell to the floor. We went and tightly pinned down the assassin, then those warriors broke down the door."

"Are you sure about what you saw?" Pod asked doubtfully, "That bird, no, the person who can transform into a bird, where is she? Could it be that you secretly drunk Dreamland Water and were hallucinating?"

"By the time we had subdued the assassin, she had already left." Pod's father raised his palm and slapped at the back of Pod's head, which made Pod stagger. "You dare doubt what I said. You're in for punishment!"

The crowd burst into laughter.

The feathers attracted Nini's attention—they had similar colors to ordinary Goshawk's feathers but were much wider and softer. She carefully collected those feathers, pinned them to her head, and looked up and down at herself.

She felt she could fly too... Her heart was full of satisfaction, thinking she could use them as a headpiece.

This seemingly thrilling assassination did not draw much attention. Soon enough, people began to talk about the king and his followers. They were not aware of it but at least ten such incidents had already happened.

Fortunately, with Sylvie on guard, all the individual assassinations that relied on luck ended up in failure. Furthermore, the patrol team silently caught most of the criminals before their plans could be carried out.

"Well done." While constantly waving towards the audience, Roland took a second to nod and said toward the carriage behind him, "I didn't expect that there were still so many remnant factions left in the old king's city. It seems the situation isn't as stable as we imagined."

"My pleasure, Your Majesty," Sylvie replied.

"Since you knew it wasn't stable, you shouldn't have chosen to enter the city this way," Agatha said coldly—not sure whether it was age related decision, Roland felt her temper had become more and more similar to Scroll when it came to the matter of security. "Common people like you are too fragile. Sometimes an obscure wound can kill you," Agatha said.

"I'd stop any attack," next to Agatha, Anna said calmly. "Besides, Nana Pine is also among the security team."

"You are spoiling him."

"Ahem..." Roland hurriedly cut in. "In order to improve myself in

the eyes of the people, such a risk is worth taking. After all, as a new king, I need to become acquainted with my subjects."

In the carriage, there was Sylvie, Agatha, Isabella, Phyllis, and Zooey. Additionally, the elites of the First Army were in the surrounding area. Theoretically, such a powerful combination of guards could guarantee zero chance of an incident occurring.

"That's irrelevant. You could have chosen a safer way, such as standing on a platform in the palace and speaking to your subjects."

Indeed, he did this for no other reason than to enjoy the fun of making an inspection tour. If he could, he'd prefer setting up two voice tubes in front of the carriage and greet his subjects with words like "Hello, my people...".

"Your Majesty, we're arriving at the palace," his guard said, which also had the effect of stopping Agatha from complaining anymore.

Roland sighed in relief. Through the redecorated inner city gate, he saw a group of nearly 100 men standing respectfully, waiting for his arrival. Some of them were the Western Region's old officials, such as Theo and Barov's disciples, some were new officials who were originally surrendered small nobles, but most of them were newly enrolled scholars and civilians.

Since the completion of the previous reform, the entire Central Region of Graycastle was officially in his control. When the Eastern Front Army took over the Seawindshire region, Graycastle would basically be an integrated kingdom.

When the carriage stopped, Roland lifted his cloak in high spirit, got off the carriage step by step, and waved toward the audience behind him.

"Let's go. Follow me to the palace!"

Chapter 883: A New Generation of Officials

"Respects to Your Majesty!"

Following the ceremonial officer Blanche Orlando's lead, all of the officials knelt down in unison such that they formed a low human wall along both sides of the palace.

"Respects to Your Majesty!"

Next to follow were the servants and maids who took charge of the palace's daily cleaning and routine matters. As Roland swept his eyes across the hall, he saw that everyone's heads were lowered, and their facial expressions were filled with both respect and fear.

"Respects to Your Majesty!"

Last to follow were the soldiers of the First Army, who knelt down behind him. Their voices were the loudest of the three groups, sounding almost like an unceasing succession of tidal waves.

Roland had thought that he would be unmoved by such a scene, having observed numerous large crowds and spectacular military parades in his time. Yet, at the moment of experience, he realized that it was invariably heart-warming to be revered by so many people, no matter how many times it had happened before.

As the crowd continued to cheer loudly, Roland walked up the steps toward the core area of the old King's City - the Holy Temple of Double Towers.

After he had sat down firmly on the throne, the officials made their way into the hall one after another and arranged themselves in three rows in front of him. Roland could not help feeling a little emotional as he observed these nearly 100 people. The City of Dawn was indeed worthy of being the Kingdom of Graycastle's former center - it had taken only a year to recruit all of these

officials, who were already equipped with literacy skills. Even more commendable was the fact that most of them were from humble backgrounds. This level of education was perhaps only rivaled by Neverwinter City.

"Your Majesty, this is your scepter." Blanche respectfully handed him a shining gold staff. Exquisite patterns were engraved all over it, while a translucent blue sapphire was embedded on its tip. "It's forged by a goldsmith who specializes in making these things. Every king's scepter is furnished with its own unique features."

Roland was normally uninterested in such meaningless symbols of power. He felt that people might get the impression that he was a young upstart if he acted overly unceremonious and rude. However, he quickly discovered that the artifact was not simply for display. After all, it was not easy to gather everyone's attention in such a large and spacious hall.

And the scepter was the best tool for this purpose.

He raised it up high before tapping it on the floor. With that, the crowd became quiet at once.

"All of you know who I am already, so I shall skip the introduction." Roland scanned the entire hall and spoke at a slow pace. "My goals for this expedition are simple. The first is to eliminate threats, and the second is to put things back in order. My definition of 'threat' isn't confined to military opponents, but includes anyone who hinders the implementation of the new policies, whether he be a noble, merchant, freeman or a rat. These people shall be dealt with no differently from rebels."

"To achieve the second goal, an administrative system similar to that of Neverwinter City will be put in place. By now, all of you should've heard that anyone who becomes a City Hall official shall receive generous rewards and benefits, while promotion won't be based on ancestry or family background. In other words, based on ability, a commoner can rise to the ranks of a minister or even the

Prime Minister!"

A flurry of whispers and murmurs arose in the crowd at once. Before this announcement, even the minor nobles, let alone the commoners, could not imagine attaining such lofty positions even in their wildest dreams. The story of Barov, who rose from being a treasurer's apprentice to becoming a figure only second to His Majesty in power, was already well-known in these parts. Everyone's eyes began to sear as they contemplated their chance of becoming a minister one day.

"Of course, not everyone will be admitted into the city hall. You'll need to pass the examination first." Roland continued calmly.

The discussions grew even louder.

"Your Majesty, what'll be tested?" Someone from the crowd boldly asked.

"Questions that seek out the individual's reliability. This is no different from that done in the Neverwinter city hall," he explained with a smile. "A candidate shan't have to get every question right to pass, but there'll be a minimum score that has to be met. The specific contents of the examination shall be announced just prior to it."

In truth, the question set was adapted from the Ten Questions of Loyalty compiled by Scroll, plus a few more questions concerning the candidate's work attitude and expectation. The main purpose of the test was to ensure the purity of the administrative team, albeit it was not called a loyalty test as that might scare off people who thought too much. During this era, disloyalty was considered a terrible sin and could take several forms. For example, insulting the monarchy in one's mind, or discussing the king's deeds and misdeeds over drunk conversation, were considered acts of disloyalty by law. Yet, which citizen had never complained in private before? Not to mention the nobles. If people knew that loyalty was being tested, many would certainly stay away from the

examination.

Of course, when the scale of recruitment expanded in the future, Nightingale would be unable to examine every candidate thoroughly. However, at this preliminary stage, Roland hoped that the dependability of the administration could be ensured as much as possible. After all, many of those handpicked at this stage would eventually become stalwarts of the administration as long as they could adapt to the new system.

"Anyone who's recruited into the city hall will have to relinquish their businesses," he added. "No official shall be allowed to have dealings with merchants, or they'll be heavily punished if caught. I hope that everyone will consider this point carefully."

These words had the effect of a pail of cold water, and the hall became somewhat quieter at once.

Unlike Bordertown, most people in the old King's City held long-term jobs, and thus it was a difficult choice for them to forsake all that they had built up and commit to a new job.

However, this was a necessary measure to promote the concept of professionalism. Perhaps, some people would simply hand their businesses to their distant relatives or hire other people to run their businesses for them, but nevertheless, it was important to maintain this policy on the surface at least. Roland fully knew that genuine "officials" did not exist in the Four Kingdoms; ministerial appointments were granted to nobles whom the king trusted, and as such, working for him was viewed as a form of glory instead of duty. And when their glory was not under threat, they would consider their personal interests first.

Through professionalization, the selected personnel would be bound to their jobs, and they would be held accountable for their departments' success such that it would be impossible for them to seek fraudulent benefits. The only way for them to obtain more benefits would be through the increasing prosperity of the

kingdom.

By separating business and politics, it would also help to prevent situations where an individual was a competitor and an arbiter at the same time.

"My final point is, I shall personally record the name of every city hall official, regardless of his position." Seeing that the mood had dampened, Roland decided to throw out the sweetener he had long prepared. "Your position, as well as the benefits it warrants, won't only be effective in this city. All territories under my rule shall recognize your authority."

This was the biggest draw of a professional bureaucracy.

The significance of becoming a bureaucrat was self-evident. It was not only a form of recognition but also offered the greatest security. Though the people in the hall might not be aware of its entire scope of benefits at the moment, they would understand the wonderful taste of "eating national food" over time.

As the old King's City had already been through several screenings, the noble class had all but disappeared, and thus the city was much easier to reorganize than the previous few cities. Many people retained doubts about the proposed plan, but nobody came forth to openly oppose it, while many more were willing to give the examination a go. A long queue quickly formed at the registration area after the convention ended.

Roland returned to his study and was about to invite Theo, Yorko, and other old pals over for a private chat when a guard hurriedly entered the room.

"Your Majesty, we've just received a report from the unit stationed in the Northern Region. They've caught sight of the Kingdom of Dawn's army to the west of Hermes."

Chapter 884: The Impact of War

"How's the situation in the west?"

As soon as Nail and Uncle Sang entered the central tent, "Eagle Face", the commander of the garrison in the Northern Region, inquired about the state of the war.

"They're still increasing." The veteran administered a military salute and briefly reported the findings of his observation over the past week. "I was indeed surprised. I never thought there'd be such a great force in the Kingdom of Dawn."

"How many of them?" Eagle Face poured two cups of tea for them, looking completely unperturbed. "8,000? 9,000?"

"I'm afraid it's over 10,000." Uncle Sang drained the cup. "There's a nearly one mile stretch of encampments, along with more than 20 banners whose names I can't tell. I have no idea where they've found so many people that are willing to cast their lives away."

"Over 10,000?" Eagle Face stopped his writing.

"Ask the unit leader if you don't believe me." Uncle Sang pointed to Nail next to him. "In order to get an estimate of their number, we went very close to the old Holy City under the risk of being discovered. The entire suburb is filled with troops commanded by the nobles from the Kingdom of Dawn. They've blocked the path that connects Hermes and the kingdom. Most refugees have retreated toward the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter. I bet they've also deployed forces at Coldwind Ridge as well. At least, I've seen several detachments of more than 100 people on the way back."

"That's true," Nail added with a nod. "On the part of the Kingdom of Dawn, they're now waiting for the rest of their troops to get there whilst enhancing their defense of the surrounding areas. I suggest that our scout team not get too close to the old Holy City in

the future, lest they're discovered by their patrolling knights."

Ever since they had noticed the unusual situation in Hermes, the garrison in the Northern Region had started to slowly proceed to the plateau area with the assistance of Duke Kant, not only to gather more intelligence but also to prepare for the upcoming battle. However, His Majesty did not approve Eagle Face's probing and attacking plan, only asking him to instead stay alert and continue to scout. With morbid disappointment, instead of waging a great war, the deputy battalion commander instead picked some capable soldiers from the garrison, instructing them to disguise as refugees to monitor both the new and the old Holy Cities in a rotation. In the meantime, he continued to update Neverwinter on the progress of the investigation.

Nevertheless, Eagle Face had still made a few accomplishments over the past few months. After he had confirmed that the deployment of corps in the Holy City was not a trap, the garrison in the Northern Region had retrieved Coldwind Ridge.

As for the army of the Kingdom of Dawn, they had only appeared two to three weeks ago.

"Sir, do you fear that those people will impede His Majesty's plan?"

"Hahaha, how is it possible?" Eagle Face burst into laughter. "Even if their number doubles, they're no more than some waddling targets. Even the God's Punishment Army failed to break the defensive line under the bombardment of machine guns. How can they possibly approach His Majesty? I'm actually happy to see they have tons of people. Let them attack the city wall of the Holy City first so that they'll know how fortified the church is. I really hope that the fight would bleed off strength from both of them. By then, I'm sure His Majesty will agree to my proposal." Eagle Face paused for a few seconds and then said, "Good job, scouts. You can take a rest now."

"Yes, sir." Uncle Sang saluted.

Nail, however, did not leave immediately. After a moment of hesitation, he asked, "Can't we... beat them off now?"

Both Eagle Face and Uncle Sang were stunned. "What?"

"His Majesty doesn't allow us to attack Hermes on our own, but it doesn't mean he doesn't let us fight against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn ." Nail bit his lip. "If we wait until they launch an attack on the Holy City, the villages at the foot of Mountain Hermes may have already been razed to the ground."

The veteran sighed.

"Did you see something?" Eagle Face frowned.

"Pillage and massacre..." Nail clapped his hand over his forehead, reluctant to revisit the intense and inhumane scene. "They didn't enter the old Holy City but simply encamped outside. Soldiers have mounted nearby residents on sharpened wooden stakes and used them as the parapet of the battalion. They treat women even worse..."

"Enough." Eagle Face interrupted him. "This is common in a war! Both the church and the Kingdom of Dawn are His Majesty's enemies. It's better for the enemies to consume each other than we doing it for them! Also, don't forget we're soldiers, the swords of His Majesty! It's our duty to kill."

"But that's different!" Nail persisted. "We fight to help His Majesty achieve his goal, but they... they kill just for the sake of killing. Those villagers aren't believers, but they're treated worse than animals."

"Sir, Nail is just overreacting a little." Seeing Eagle Face's face cloud over, Uncle Sang explained immediately. He then turned to Nail and reproached. "Seriously? Do you know what you're talking about? As long as the church is still there, we can't cross the Hermes Plateau. How can we stop the army of the Kingdom of

Dawn if the church is in our way?"

The New Holy City, which functioned as a great stronghold, connected all the flat areas of the plateau together. The four city gates in the outer part of the city were facing the four paths leading to the four kingdoms. Although the gates, currently unguarded, were accessible to refugees, it did not mean the church would allow the First Army to drive straight in, pass the Holy City, and enter the territory of the Kingdom of Dawn without any resistance.

Nail certainly knew that. He took a deep breath and said, "Actually, there's an alternative pathway."

"A pathway?"

"I talked to some of the refugees on my way back. One of them told me that there's a path wide enough for two people to walk abreast in the steep cliffs on the outer side of the plateau. The road will be blocked by snow and ice in winter. However, when the snow melts, the path is again accessible, and you can directly cross Hermes without intruding upon the Holy City."

Eagle Face gazed at him for quite a while and shook his head. "Forget about it."

Nail dropped his head and fell silent.

"You also know very well that this isn't a reliable plan... no, it's an unachievable plan I should say." The deputy battalion commander was surprisingly patient. "First of all, it's questionable whether this passageway exists or not. Also, even if it does, and it successfully leads us to the old Holy City, we can't defeat a force of 10,000 people at once. His Majesty said very clearly during the night session that logistics always comes first before any operation. It would be hard to transport supplies on a path only wide enough for two people, not to mention machine guns and ammunition. Besides, there're only 500 people stationed in the Northern Region. The ammunition we're currently equipped with

isn't enough to conduct a prolonged war. Once we're routed, we'll be defenseless. It's likely that the whole army would be wiped out!"

Eagle Face rose to his feet and walked up to Nail. "I want to fight a battle of annihilation more than you do, but that's just my personal opinion. As His Majesty and Sir Iron Axe have entrusted the army to me, I have the obligation to first think about the issue of safety and seek the best interests of the army when it comes to decision-making, whether it's regarding the current decision or the previous one with respect to the refugee settlement. Do you understand?"

"... Yes, sir." Nail clenched his fist but at length performed a military salute.

"Off you go."

When the two were about to retire, a soldier lifted the curtain and entered. "Sir, a reply from His Majesty."

"Really? Give it to me." Eagle Face unfolded the encrypted letter in a haste. No sooner had Nail and Uncle Sang left the tent did he stop them. "Wait a minute!"

"His Majesty has new instructions?" the veteran asked.

"Yes. The First Army has set off from king's city by boat and is now heading to the Northern Region at full speed. They'll be arriving at Coldwind Ridge in about 10 days."

"That'll be too late... after 10 days." Nail lamented within himself. The army of the Kingdom of Dawn could reach the old Holy City anytime and turn the villages at the foot of Mount Hermes into an earthly hell within a couple of days. For a moment, he seemed to see the lady who had struggled under musket fire again, denouncing what he had done.

"Before their arrival, His Majesty wants us to take action immediately to prevent the army of the Kingdom of Dawn from entering the old Holy City. At least, we have to prevent them

plundering the monastery."

Nail raised his head abruptly.

"Can we... manage that?" Uncle Sang scratched the back of his head.

"It's going to be very hard. That's why His Majesty has dispatched special reinforcements who will arrive in the Northern Region tomorrow night." Eagle Face closed the encrypted letter. "Only the witches can get here that fast." He then turned to the two men. "Call a meeting with all the unit leaders! By the way, what's the name of the refugee who knows the secret pathway?"

Chapter 885: The Unlucky Tradesman

Tangen thought himself very unfortunate.

He was merely an ordinary tradesman who traveled between the City of Evernight and Hermes, selling furs and flannels produced in Graycastle to the church and bringing amulets or sculptures dipped in the holy water back to Graycastle. It had taken him nearly 10 years to finally establish himself and survive the fierce competition among his peers.

Tangen had decided to use the extra money he had to expand his business. Therefore, he had purchased a residence with an additional warehouse at the skirt of the new Holy City to store his inventory. When he had been about to launch his business, however, the situation in the north had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. A great conflict between the new king of Graycastle and the church had broken out, which had resulted in a rapid decrease in the need for tokens of faith like amulets. As a consequence, he had not profited anything from the sale and instead had suffered a loss of around 20%.

Nevertheless, Tangen believed he could still earn something by selling furs. As the tension between the church and the king increased, the price of furs actually went up. At that time, he had firmly believed that the church would gain the eventual victory. As a frequent visitor to the Holy City, Tangen knew how fortified the church was. Even the most skillful knight in the kingdom might not be able to compete against a Judgement Warrior, who was subject to the most intense training in Hermes.

However, to his dismay, the church was defeated and it was a miserable defeat. His business had thus totally failed. Although he had reduced the price by 30%, nobody made a purchase. It was only until the Holy City had descended into a state of chaos and that his inventory had been stolen that Tangen had finally realized that the Holy City was no longer safe.

In fact, he had had an ominous feeling ever since the collapse of the cathedral. However, unwilling to abandon his entire business that he had developed and been working on for so many years, he had taken a chance to stay. The arrival of the army of the Kingdom of Dawn at the foot of the Mountain Hermes, unfortunately, was the last straw. It was obvious that those soldiers had come here for the wealth that the church had accumulated for centuries. Tangen was sure that with intense avarice, those soldiers would have not only have robbed his furs but also taken his life if he continued to linger.

After making the difficult decision with a flash of determination, Tangen had headed to the south with many other merchants. Through toils and snares, they had, in the end, arrived at Graycastle a few days later. They were treated fairly by the garrison troops at the border, asked some simple questions by the soldiers, and taken to a campground specifically for refugees. Afterwards, they were told that a fleet sent by the Duke of the Northern Region would take them back to the city in two days.

Although his life work had been cast to the wind, Tangen was much more fortunate than his rival "miser" Socas who had died on the way. After all, he was alive and still had a place to live in the City of Evernight, where his wife and children were waiting for him. At this thought, Tangen felt much better and thought all his misfortunes had finally come to an end.

But his heart soon sank when two soldiers sent by the new king found him and took him out of the campsite. He tried to bribe the pair for some information with a few silver royals but failed miserably.

Do they want to take advantage of me when I'm most helpless and strip all my money?

Tangen clasped his money pouch over his chest. This was the last bit he had. If he lost it, he would not be able to survive.

Yet he was too scared to refuse these soldiers' request, for he was certainly not strong enough to resist the ferocious army that had even crushed the church. If he infuriated these monsters, he would probably suffer a more painful death.

Tangen wailed in silence as he walked. "Why am I the misfortunate one? Why did they pick me rather than anyone else? Am I now cursed by the Gods because I dumped all the overstocked amulets and sculptures into the ditch?"

Filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and lamentation, he did not hear the question posed by the deputy battalion commander until a moment later.

"Wh-what... pathway?"

The deputy commander did not fly into a rage but repeated his question patiently. "One of my soldiers told me that you know a pathway that would allow us to take a detour around the new Holy City and directly reach the foot of Mountain Hermes. Is it true?"

"The one you told me about. You said some tradesmen often use that pathway to smuggle valuable goods. You did it a few times with them as well." Another person put in.

"Hold on... So they aren't coming for my gold royals?" Tangen stole a glance at the person and found it was the young soldier he had met on his way. He remembered his name was Nail. Since Nail looked like a pretty nice guy, Tangen had had a little chat with him and had also attempted to impress Nail by disclosing that he had once evaded sales taxes imposed by the church by using the pathway. He never expected that it would bring him such trouble!

But there was no point regretting it now.

"Well, there's indeed a pathway. The locals call it Cloud Ladder." Tangen forced an answer. "But it only appears after the snow melts, and it becomes inaccessible when it's rainy or foggy. It's rumored that the pathway leads to different directions, but I only know the

one to the Kingdom of Dawn.

"Very well." The commander nodded. "You show my men the way. If they successfully reach the foot of Mountain Hermes, I'll reward you for your service."

"Mercy, sir!" Tangen went to his knees immediately. "I don't want a reward but just to go home after it's done."

"Unfortunately you can't." The commander's reply sent a chill down his spine. "To make sure everything goes smoothly, you must stay with us for the next few days until we no longer need you."

"But, but sir..." Before Tangen could finish his sentence, the commander tossed him five gold royals.

"This is the deposit. There'll be another five after the mission is completed." The commander interrupted him. "You should know very well what 10 gold royals can afford in most parts of Graycastle."

Tangen swallowed hard. 10 gold royals could afford a life. After doing business for so many years, his entire cash flow was merely a little over 30 gold royals. It was obvious that the commander intended to buy out his life with 10 gold royals, and there was no ground for him to negotiate.

"Will... you really let me go?" Although Tangen already knew the answer, he still asked.

"Naturally. As long as you work hard as a guide, I assure you that you'll be escorted to the City of Evernight."

...

Tangen left the campground apprehensively and found the two soldiers who accompanied him were the young man named Nail and an elder soldier.

"You really cooked my goose." Tangen smiled dryly. From the

look of the two people, Tangen learned that it was simply a coincidence rather than a deliberate frame-up.

"How is it possible?" Nail knitted his brows. "10 gold royals isn't a small amount. As long as you act with utmost good faith, you don't need to worry about running into any dangers."

"Rest assured. Our commander is a man of his word. If he says you can go, you definitely will." The elder soldier put in. "Plus, 10 gold royals for just showing the way? I'd be more than happy to do that."

"Sir, you're..."

"Just call me Uncle Sang. You don't need to address me with such formality. If you really insist, do it to Nail. He's the unit leader, my superior."

"R-really?" Tangen looked a little embarrassed. He had thought the young man was just a soldier of the lowest military rank.

"Just Nail." Nail waved his hand casually.

"Can either of you tell me what the mission your deputy battalion commander referred to... exactly is?"

"We have to go around the Hermes Plateau and stop the army of the Kingdom of Dawn at the old Holy City."

"Unit leader!" Uncle Sang reminded Nail.

"It's OK. He'll stay with us in the next couple of days. Plus, he won't go making any random and blind conjectures if he's informed of a little bit. This will help us complete our mission. Besides, I'll shoot him down immediately if I find him plotting something."

Tangen shivered at Nail's words, but his attention was drawn to the former half of the speech, which sounded even more inconceivable...

"To stop the army of the Kingdom of Dawn?" Tangen's eyes were

wide open. "That's impossible. The pathway is scarcely wide enough for two men to walk abreast, and some parts of the road have collapsed. One misstep you'll fall off the cliff." "Even if you walk from dawn to dusk, you can only transfer several hundred people in a week. How are you supposed to fight against those knights? It's also probable that the church will attack you from behind!"

"We aren't fighting alone," Nail answered placidly. "His Majesty's reinforcement will be arriving at Coldwind Ridge soon. You'll see just how the First Army does battle."

Chapter 886: Weapons and Arts

"Reinforcements? Did he understand what he was saying?" Tangen thought to himself while twitching his lips. "It would be useless if the reinforcements could not cross the pathway. Or did he mean reinforcements that could instantly pulverize Hermes to the ground and stride across the ruin of the Holy City? If that were the case, they would need at least a dozen days to get prepared for the strike."

Noticing that Nail did not have any intention of speaking more on the matter, Tangen decided to drop the topic.

One of the entrances to Cloud Ladder was on a cliff, not far away from Coldwind Ridge. They entered from a cave that was barely visible from the outside. When they could see the sky above their heads again, they found themselves seemingly in midair. The air was wet with clouds and fog filling the road. They suddenly understood why this passage was called Cloud Ladder as they felt like they were climbing to heaven.

Despite the dangerous road, as long as the weather was good, the path was reliable. Tangen had exaggerated how unsafe Cloud Ladder was, to prevent the First Army from going there. He didn't tell Nail that a couple of merchants reinforced the stability of the cave and strengthened the road with planks and wedges so that they could continuously use the pathway to evade taxes. As a result, the rumors of the dangerous road were false.

Within half a day, Tangen had led Nail and his men up and down the path three times. Without any mountain roads or passes set up by the Holy City, the pathway had shortened the distance considerably. It was more efficient for light infantry to travel via the path than via the main road.

Tangen noticed that Nail was repeatedly making notes in a small book. Apart from the everyday language widely used throughout

the continent, there were also some unfamiliar symbols he had never seen. Tangen was surprised that a soldier could not only read and write but also had knowledge he couldn't understand. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he probably wouldn't have believed it.

Tangen had joined a Chamber of Commerce to learn bookkeeping and how to record transactions. He had spent a whole gold royal dedicated to just his primary business education. Tangen did not understand that if Nail could read and write, why he had still selected such a high-risk career, working as a soldier and putting his life on the line. Although Roland Wimbledon's army was impressive, there was no war without death. Nobody could guarantee that he was not the next.

However, during their conversation, Tangen learned that reading, writing and map drawing were not considered "advanced skills". It appeared that every member of the First Army possessed such skills.

"What are they all thinking?!"

Tangen was even more confused.

By the time they returned to the campsite, it was almost nightfall. There was quite a buzz around the tent. Tangen saw a group of soldiers excitedly discussing something. All their eyes were locked on the bonfire in the center of the campground.

"It seems that the reinforcements are here." Nail grinned.

"I think so, too." Uncle Sang smiled. "I wonder which familiar faces we will see this time."

"Miss Lightning and Miss Maggie must be among them." The unit leader accelerated his paces. "Let's go take a look."

Wh-what... Miss?

The reinforcements they've been waiting for were ... women?

Tangen followed at their heels. He picked an open space, stood on his tiptoes, and looked in the direction of the crowd. Upon seeing the "reinforcements", he felt like he was going to pass out.

What the hell? They're the reinforcements?!

These are just a bunch of kids!

Especially the one whose hair nearly reached the ground. Judging from the kid's round face and bright, sparkling eyes, Tangen thought she couldn't be more than ten years old!

The others were only a bit older. They all looked frail and tiny; whose legs and arms were not even as thick as Tangen's fist. He thought they would not be of any use on the battlefield, for they probably couldn't raise a sword.

"This is ridiculous — Wait..." Tangen paused for a second and suddenly became a little uncertain.

One of the reasons for his uncertainty was the physical appearances of those girls. They looked much prettier than ordinary women. Tangen had not noticed their unique beauty at first, but when a group of them stuck together, he immediately came to realize that they were probably witches.

Witches were not as horrible as people thought them to be. If it were true that they were as powerful as demons from hell, they would've destroyed the church and the worldly kingdoms long before. As an experienced, well-informed tradesman, Tangen knew that with a God's Punishment Stone, even a knight could easily kill several witches at a time. Witches weren't stronger than ordinary people when their power was rendered useless.

But everything became trickier when another person's influence was factored in.

Tangen held his breath and rested his eyes on another green-haired lady.

He had seen her once... at the celebration ceremony in the City of

Evernight. Although she was not the most beautiful girl among the group, she was more attractive than anybody else he had seen at the celebration. Nobody would ever forget an elegant lady with such a strong and distinctive character.

It was Edith Kant, the daughter of the Duke of the City of Evernight, who was also known as the Pearl of the Northern Region.

She could be charming and enchanted in daily life but also valiant and fearless enough to behead her enemies on the battlefield with her longsword. It was rumored that her skill in fencing was as stunning as her appearance. What people feared most, however, was her unpredictable and even slightly eccentric work style. All the people who had once scorned her had paid a steep price for their insolence. When it came to anecdotes regarding the Pearl of the Northern Region, the residents in the City of Evernight could ramble on and on for several nights.

It appeared that Duke Kant had sided entirely with the new king; otherwise, he would never allow his beloved daughter to come to the barracks alone, unguarded. Further, from the respectful attitude with which the deputy battalion commander treated Edith, Tangen judged that she would not disgrace her title "Pearl" even if she were out of the Northern Region.

The new king's army was so powerful that they could even defeat the church.

Combining the assistance of the witches and Edith Kant with his invincible army, the new king would probably cause great trouble for the Kingdom of Dawn's army.

Apart from the "reinforcements", Tangen was also intrigued by something else.

He saw a strange-looking iron frame next to the bonfire. The symmetrical structure looked like a shoulder pole at first glance, with one basket attached to either end of the pole, each containing

four rows of metal cylinders. All the cylinders had pointy tails and fat heads. Tangen could not immediately figure out what they were made of.

He somehow felt a little disturbed at the sight of the metal objects.

After studying them for quite a while, Tangen finally understood from where his anxious feeling came.

The nine cylinders, which were as tall as a full-grown man, were almost identical. From their fat heads to their pointy tails, all of them had the same smooth curve!

This discovery made his hands sweat. Tangen knew that as the hardest material in the world, metals needed to be repeatedly smelted and hammered before being beaten into shape. All the blacksmiths he knew had told him that it required a great amount of skill to forge nicely-shaped, smooth-surfaced ironware.

What a fantastic technique it is to be able to shape a five-foot iron shard into a smooth curve!

And to use that same technique to make nine replicates?

If he told this story to any of the blacksmiths in the City of Neverwinter, they would mock him for his ignorance.

It would be more understandable if all nine cylinders were refined art pieces, but surprisingly they were not.

Tangen knew from their grayish color and the sloppy way they were stored that these cylinders were not expensive, delicate pieces of art.

They were likely some unique weapon since they had been transported here to the barracks by the "reinforcements".

Nevertheless, these sturdy and durable weapons somehow gave a particular aesthetic pleasure as if they were pieces of art. The intense shock brought by this sheer contrast was unprecedented

and indescribable.

Tangen swallowed hard and realized that he probably could not label himself as "well-informed" anymore.

For these people, war seemed to have become something else.

A realm beyond his imagination.

Chapter 887: Bomber Action

At this time, in a big tent located at the center of the Northern Region Garrison's camping ground, everyone was busy preparing for the upcoming battle.

Eagle Face was astonished by Edith's plan. "Leave the entire front to the witches? I trust their abilities, but there are at least 10,000 people in the army of the Kingdom of Dawn and many of them wear God's Stones of Retaliation. If the witches fell into a bitter fight there, it'll be hard for us to save them."

"Those were my initial thoughts of this plan." Edith smiled. "In fact, it's not the Adviser Department's plan but His Majesty's idea."

"Do you have a formal record of this?" asked the deputy battalion commander.

"Here you are." The Pearl of the Northern Region gave him a confidential letter marked with a red seal. "By the way, you can see that in the last part of the letter, the king has temporarily given me the power of commander."

In accordance with the rules of the First Army, any pre-war combat strategy must have a paper record which should be audited and signed by officers at a corresponding level, and a plan signed by His Majesty himself must be unconditionally executed.

After confirming the validity of the signature, Eagle Face promptly stood straight and made a military salute. "The Northern Region garrison promises to fulfil the mission!"

"Good." Edith smiled. "But remember, your purpose is to give the enemy a destructive blow when they retreat in disorder. Please note the prerequisite. If they're not fleeing hurriedly, you should consider it a sign of failure and backtrack to Cloud Ladder. No unauthorized military action is allowed. You must clearly explain this order to every soldier."

"Backtrack? Do you mean... retreat?" Eagle Face was stunned.
"Isn't His Majesty sure about whether this plan is feasible?"

"We've never tried this before, so who knows? If it doesn't work, we must consider other strategies... That's why His Majesty sent me here." The Pearl of the Northern Region said straightforwardly.

"What about the witches?"

"They won't be in any danger even if they fail."

"Got it. I'll go prepare for this task. Our troops will set out tomorrow morning." Eagle Face saluted again.

"This operation is named Bomber Action and once your troops are in place, the battle will begin." Edith made a military salute to him. "Well, go."

"Yes!"

Although Eagle Face did not really know what "bomber" meant, he had faith in this thing. He was firmly convinced that all the kings' new inventions were extraordinary, just like the steam engine.

After two days of waiting in the camp, Lightning finally received the order to take action.

Sylvie's voice came through a Sigil of Listening in her hand. "Margie has transported all the people into place. You can set off now. The Kingdom of Dawn's soldiers have taken down their tents and packed. They are beginning to form up for battle. Hope you can catch up with them."

"Don't worry. We'll be there soon." With these words, the little girl turned back and waved to Maggie and Hummingbird. "Come on. It's time to go!"

In the past two days, she had flown in the sky to check the map of Cloud Ladder and survey the situation of all the surrounding areas.

His Majesty's plan was not complicated. The six witches were divided into two teams. One was in charge of transportation and logistics and thus mainly relied on Margie's Magic Ark to complete their task. Sylvie and Lily were also in this group. The former was able to detect distant enemies to ensure that they could seize the initiative on the battlefield. The latter could prevent the church's demonic plague in case the church got desperate and spread it to kill the Kingdom of Dawn's soldiers who broke into the old Holy City.

The other team was the heart of this military operation.

"Oh!"

"Coo!"

Hummingbird sat in the bomb carrier and held the connecting rods on both sides of her seat. She made her magic power constantly circulate throughout this iron structure which Roland named "The East Wind". Soon, the weight of this bomb carrier and the eight bombs it carried was reduced by 99% and was just within Maggie's carrying capacity.

The white-haired girl transformed herself into a big beast and leaned over the bomb carrier. Lightning went to tie the cloth straps and ropes, binding Maggie and "the East Wind" together.

As Hummingbird's ability could not effect on the living things, Maggie was actually carrying a witch and "the East Wind" which was now as light as the witch. As long as Hummingbird could maintain the weight-reducing effect, Maggie would be able to perform precision strike missions for a long time.

Roland had used the hydrogen balloon to bomb the king's city and had achieved remarkable success. Based on the post-war reports of that attack, he had made a few improvements.

Maggie's role in this mission was to replace the balloon since she flew faster and moved much more flexibly. More importantly, she

could swoop before dropping bombs, which would save Lightning the trouble of revising the direction and allowed her to focus on detection and navigation.

Limited by her magic power, Hummingbird was unable to sustain the weight-reducing effect for "The East Wind" throughout the day. Though her power had increased a lot since she had started to practice carrying cannons, she could only manage to lift these bulky, heavy bombs for half a day at most. After all, most of the time, the bomb shells, warheads, and ammunition were transported separately.

Fortunately, the Kingdom of Dawn's army was not far away. Half a day was enough.

"The road is clear. You can take off. Repeat, you can take off!" Lightning put on her goggles and leaped up into the air.

"Ah... it's coming again." Hummingbird sighed.

"Ow ow ow!"

Maggie, now in the form of a giant flying beast, flapped her broad wings and took off, casting a huge shadow on the ground. The tents in the camp had begun to shake due to the airflow caused by her wings, which was as strong as a howling gale. She adjusted her direction and headed for the Hermes mountain.

An hour later, the three witches were in the sky above the old Holy City and easily spotted their target, an army of over 10,000 people. As seen from above, this army resembled a stream outside the city but inside it, the soldiers dispersed. They seemed like colorful ants creeping around slowly and nibbling the old Holy City's territory away.

Lightning did not like the church at all and felt no pity seeing it suffer from this plundering. However, she also knew that countless people inside the city were innocent, especially those orphans who had been taken to the monastery by the church.

She thought they should not be buried here together with the old Holy City.

The little girl inhaled deeply and kept ascending until she felt some breathing difficulty. She opened her arms and dived along the middle of the stream of people, moving in the opposite direction to the army of the Kingdom of Dawn.

This sharp descent made her feel as if all her internal organs were moving backwards. It was not a pleasant feeling but she was still thrilled by the high speed.

She did not look back for she was sure that Maggie must have been closely following her. After spending these years together, they could cooperate flawlessly.

The people and things on the ground rapidly became clearer and some knights apparently also noticed the shadow falling from the sky. She could even see the scared looks on their faces.

When the girl and the beast flew down to the middle part of the stream of people, the girl suddenly flew up while shouting. "Now, drop the bombs!"

Hummingbird, who was sitting in the bomb carrier, immediately pulled the switch.

Chapter 888: Heavenly Divine Retribution

With a clicking sound, the bolt loosened. Two bombs, each as heavy as Nightingale, slid out of the bomb carrier and fell toward the crowd due to their inertia.

After leaving the East Wind, the bombs instantly regained their weight while maintaining their high speed. This change gave them great momentum. As they sailed through the air, they made a friction sound which was like a strange whistle or the howling sound made by a gust of wind blowing through a cave. People on the ground simultaneously looked up at this incredible scene.

At this moment, the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn felt relieved.

They thought these two things falling from the sky were nothing compared to the big flying monster. In their view, though these things dropping from that height were able to crush anything they hit on the ground, they could, at most, kill three or four unlucky guys.

They believed this would not be a problem for such a large army. Hearing Appen's call for an expedition to the west, both great nobles such as dukes and lesser nobles like the new knights had been actively preparing their horses and eagerly recruited servants. Numerous people joined this expedition, hoping to get a share of the profits from the church that was already on the verge of collapsing.

Having an army of over 10,000 people, the nobles would not care at all if several guys or even 30 to 40 people got killed by the things falling from the sky.

They still thought of the formidable Devilbeast as a genuine threat. Once it dived into the crowd to bite and stomp, it would easily slaughter over 100 people, let alone the casualties and loss that would occur when the panicked serfs began to run away. Given that, they firmly believed that as long as the monster did not

land, they did not need to worry too much.

They also reckoned that the enemies in the sky, who were probably witches, did not have enough courage to openly fight against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn. Since they came here to rob the church of its treasures, all the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn wore God's Stones of Retaliation and brought many weapons specially made to fight witches.

At this moment, many knights put down their longbows and Magic Stone arrows and bet with each other on whose soldiers would be hit by the black stones.

No one on the ground moved out of position. No one lied down to cover themselves from the coming explosion. They just watched the two bombs flying towards them like two arrows and kept advancing steadily.

A moment later, two scarlet flames broke out in the middle of the stream of people!

People within the bombs' landing zones were instantly turned to ash. The heated air rapidly expanded, forming hot, strong blast. Everyone that bumped into it felt as if they had hit a steel wall and quickly got blown to smithereens. Soon, broken limbs and internal organs were littered everywhere.

The blast quickly died down and could not tear apart people that were 100 steps away from the center of impact, but this explosion was not the only destructive thing.

The Kingdom of Dawn's troops could hardly find any shelter, since unlike the king's city, this area connecting the Kingdom of Dawn and the old Holy City was a vast and open plain. When the bombs exploded, the defenseless people became easy targets for the explosion waves, debris and numerous iron balls shot out of the shells. They traveled through the crowd at a speed several times faster than that of the sound. Each iron ball could pierce through a dozen of people before it stopped, and the steel shell fragments

were even more destructive.

Due to the terrain advantage, the bombs caused damage over a wide area.

The witches in the sky saw the black smoke rise in a flash and form something like a high wall, which choked off the movement of the stream of people on the ground.

Before the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn recovered from the shock, Lightning had already ascended to the highest point possible, ready for the second round of diving.

"The East Wind, launch the second attack!"

Maggie immediately closed her wings and followed closely behind the little girl, falling all the way from the sky with a loud howl.

"Ow ow ow—!"

They had loaded four bombs on each side of the bomb carrier, so they could choose to carry out four bombing raids or drop all eight bombs at once. In order to achieve the best effect, Lightning intended to dive four times to throw bombs into the middle and the rear parts of the stream of people.

Beyond her expectations, during the third round of attack, the army of the Kingdom of Dawn totally collapsed.

For those who were still alive, these explosions were more like divine retribution coming from heaven. Places struck by god's thunder were all scorched and littered with corpses. Neither the serfs without protective clothing nor the fully armored knights could escape from these hellish, raging flames. This seemingly endless catastrophe made them feel desperate, and the deafening explosion noises and screams of the seriously wounded crushed their spirit.

The biggest crisis for them was that in this inconceivable series of attacks, they could do nothing except praying that the black stones

would not land near them. They had no chance of hurting the giant flying monster either since it kept hovering or swooping beyond the range of their arrows.

This kind of battle was totally beyond their understanding.

The nobles came for the wealth, but never wanted to risk their own lives in the process. No matter how much money they got from this city, they would not be able to enjoy it if they died here. They could not even carry the wealth back home if all their servants got killed in this attack.

With this thought in mind, they made a swift decision to escape.

Seeing the nobles, who had strictly prohibited the serfs from running away, turn their steeds to flee the battlefield one after another, the whole army quickly slid into chaos. As more and more people joined the fleeing knights, the stream of people started to move again, but this time, it was heading in the opposite direction. The people outside the city that had marched orderly in the beginning now stopped entering the city and started to escape in disorder.

The nightmare for the army of the Kingdom of Dawn began at this moment.

When they swarmed to the main road, the First Army's soldiers hiding in the fields on one side of the road calmly pulled their triggers

This was a typical flank attack.

The panicked nobles just wanted to leave this dangerous place as soon as possible and completely forgot about detecting enemies and protecting their flanks. Five squads of the Northern Region's garrison lined up along the road and shot the soldiers of the Kingdom of Dawn with revolving rifles and heavy machine guns. As their targets were within 300 meters, they did not even need to think about accuracy. They just kept firing, trying to shoot out all

the bullets in their guns as quickly as possible.

Before sunrise, Eagle Face's troops had already hidden themselves away in the fields where the wheat-straws were waist high. With the help of Sylvie, they could hide here without being spotted by the enemy's scouts and remain informed about the enemies' movements.

Obviously, there was a huge gap in information gathering technology between the two factions.

'Crack!' The moment the first shot rang out, the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn were astonished to find that they were ambushed by some enemy forces hiding in the fields. If this had happened when they had been marching toward the city, they would have concentrated their forces to fight back. However, now the situation was totally out of control. The soldiers of the Kingdom of Dawn were hurriedly running for their lives and wishing that they could grow extra legs to rapidly move as far away from the bullets as possible. The nobles sent their mounts rampaging through the crowd, squandering their subjects' lives.

The wide road turned into an avenue of death.

Chapter 889: A Key Person

Tangen, who had been compelled to follow the First Army, found that he had seriously underestimated this army's strength.

During the battle, they never fought in hand to hand combat against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn, and Tangen did not see a shower of arrows nor any brutal fighting scenes in this 500-meter-long front. The First Army soldiers just kept firing at their enemies and the people in the army of the Kingdom of Dawn kept falling down at the sound of the guns.

This scene seemed like a flashy show to him.

But the loud, shrill cries from the main road reminded him that it was an extremely fierce battle. This easy victory of the First Army clearly demonstrated its strength to him.

He finally understood the combat method of The First Army that Nail mentioned.

He had never seen such an well-organized, disciplined army in the past and thought that the First Army soldiers were as outstanding as their lethal weapons. In this army, hundreds of soldiers acted in unison as if they were one person. They moved quietly in the darkness to get into position and got ready for the ambush before daybreak. They silently lurked and launched an attack according to their plan. Even with no supervisor overseeing the fight, the five squads still worked closely together. The commander, Eagle Face, also came to join the ambush rather than staying in the camp. Every soldier was highly concentrated and attentive to his duty. Each order was promptly executed. He believed that if it had not been for these excellent soldiers, the First Army would have not been able to achieve such great success solely relying on their fierce weapons.

After witnessing the battle, Tangen could not help but feel glad that he had chosen to leave Hermes in time.

He thought that if he had stayed in the Holy City, a merchant like him probably would have been accused of financing the enemy when the First Army seized the city.

He secretly sighed. Well, it's really dangerous to do business in the outside world. If I can return home safely this time, I'll never leave the city of Evernight in the future.

I can carry on business within the city. Although I won't earn much money that way, I'll still be able to raise my family.

And my Fuer in the "Paradise on Earth". She must miss me very much.

I really had hoped to get home earlier. Tangen was absorbed in thought.

Towards the evening, Eagle Face stepped into a temporary tent for a meeting. He saluted Edith and handed a report to her. "The battlefield has been basically cleaned up. Here are the reports from each squad. I've briefly summarized them."

"Thank you for your hard work." The Pearl of the Northern Region received the report and roughly glanced through it. Just as she had expected, the casualty figure for the First Army was zero. As for the army of the Kingdom of Dawn, more than 1,000 people were found dead and about 600 were wounded. This fight was estimated to reduce the number of Dawn's soldiers by 20%. Most of them were killed in the explosions of the bombs and the panic-stricken stampede. The guns and bullets had greatly increased the turmoil but had not directly killed many people.

This result corresponded with the Adviser Department's predictions. The garrison of the Northern Region did not have many soldiers and the Magic Ark could only carry a limited amount of ammunition. Without effective methods to pursue and wipe out the enemies, they could only let most of them run away,

but as long as the garrison managed to drive them away, this action could be considered a success.

At the end of the battle, more than 1,800 people had dropped their weapons and surrendered and 25 of them were nobles. The one with the highest rank was an earl who claimed himself to be the lord of Bloom, but Edith was more interested in a baron named Remin Payton. According to the reports, all the nobles had promised to pay the ransom and demanded preferential treatment, except this baron. Remin had repeatedly emphasized that he had known a distinguished official of Graycastle for a long time and was a friend of the king.

"Did he really say that?" she asked Eagle Face while shaking the pamphlet in her hand.

"I assumed that it was just nonsense. Or perhaps, this guy still thinks the king is Timothy Wimbledon," the deputy battalion commander frowned and said. "What are you going to do with these nobles?"

"It's impossible for us to let their families ransom them, so throw them into the dungeon." Edith thought for a moment. "They may be useful for us in the future. As for the civilian captives, release them now. We don't have the extra food to feed them."

"Yes."

"Did you find the King of the Kingdom of Dawn, Appen Moya?"

"We've checked all the corpses and found no one that looked like him." Eagle Face shook his head. "During the interrogation, a captive said he had seen Appen and his knights fleeing the battlefield. According to him, Appen and his men changed clothes and brought with them no flag or anything bearing the coat of arms of the royal family, and the others who wanted to join them to escape were all stopped by the king's knights. However, he also admitted that he was not sure about this for he saw this from a distance and at that time, the army of the Kingdom of Dawn was in

chaos."

"Where did this captive see this?"

"Inside the old Holy City."

"There's a strong possibility that it was Appen." Edith shrugged her shoulders. "It's imperative for him to personally lead such a large army and if he was marching with the army, where do you think he was?"

"Ugh... at the head of the procession?" Eagle Face expressed some uncertainty.

"To be accurate, he should be behind the vanguard units," she answered. "As the old Holy City has no walls, the first one getting into the city will collect the most trophies in the robbery. In order to make sure that he was the first to be there, he must have made his own knightage the vanguard to eliminate threats and ensure his own profits."

"Do you mean that he and his knights were already inside the city before the Bomber Action started?"

"Well, yes. That's why Appen survived the air attacks launched by Maggie and Hummingbird and had enough time to identify the situation and choose the correct direction to escape. I have to say, he was quite wise to put aside his dignity and act decisively to escape in disguise." Edith slightly raised the corners of her mouth and quickly licked her lips.

"Damn it! We let the big fish escape," Eagle Face said angrily. "If I had arranged another group to chase..."

"No, it's of no use," she interrupted. "On such a broad plain, it's not easy to catch him unless you know his escape route in advance. We succeeded in the ambush on the main road just because we took full advantage of their retreating habit and herd mentality. If they had chosen to escape to the wheat fields on the other side of the road, we would not have achieved such an easy victory."

"..." The deputy battalion commander did not refute this but still looked very vexed at his failure to catch Appen.

"You don't need to blame yourself for this. It's not necessarily a bad thing for us." Edith smiled.

"Why?" Eagle Face raised his head in interest.

"It's complicated to explain. You only need to know that fear is contagious and when the people of the Kingdom of Dawn realize how formidable we are, they'll never belittle His Majesty's warning." The Pearl of the Northern Region paused. "Appen Moya will have a difficult time."

Knowing that she did not want to explain further, Eagle Face stopped pursuing the matter. "So what should we do next? Directly go to occupy the old Holy City?"

"No, it's impossible. The five hundred people we have are far from enough to fulfill this task." Edith denied his suggestion without hesitation. "Let's wait. Miss Maggie has gone to pick up a key person for this task. With her help, we may be able to seize this city effortlessly."

Chapter 890: Your Holiness... Isabella

Isabella was overwhelmed by her emotions when she saw the city again.

Unexpectedly, in only a year, the church, who had been the only hope of humanity to defeat demons, became a barrier to the human race's success in the Battle of Divine Will.

She had lived here for a long time but was not sentimentally attached to the church. The teachings of His Holiness O'Brien, kept ringing in her ears and reminded her that the result was always more important than the process. She was certain that if humanity could not defeat the demons, all their efforts would be meaningless.

She followed out O'Brien's instructions all her life. She had chosen to support Zero instead of Archbishop Mayne since the soul swallower had shown more potential in defeating the demons. After Zero had lost to Roland Wimbledon, she had chosen to serve the king. If even now, she could find a leader more powerful than Roland, she would choose the more capable one again without hesitation.

She did this for good reason.

In her view, the continuation of the human race was far more important than any personal interests.

Despite that, she still could not let go of some strange regret deep in her heart. She did not understand why she felt this way until she returned to the old Holy City.

She discovered that she had been feeling sorry for Zero all this time.

Back then, the Pure Witches had believed that the gulf between them and Zero, who had lived for hundreds of years, would have been exceptionally wide and many of them had secretly

complained about the soul swallower's sudden change in moods. However, Isabella had gotten along well with Zero. She found that, in comparison to the other Pure Witches, who had planned to follow their personal interests throughout the Battle of Divine Will, Zero was much more straightforward and strong-willed.

She believed that Zero was not very different from herself except that she was more accustomed to being an assistant while Zero was used to being the leader.

She was afraid that it was not Zero's nature but an inevitable choice for an experienced witch who had lived for more than 200 years.

She guessed that the Holy City would have looked very different if Zero had been able to meet Roland ten years earlier.

Unfortunately, everything had happened too late.

After circling the sky twice, Maggie landed in the camp outside the city.

"We're here. Let's get off," said Agatha, who was behind Isabella.

Isabella nodded and leaped off the beast. Some soldier that was waiting around immediately came over. "Lady Edith is waiting for you in the tent. Please come with me."

Roland had asked Maggie to bring the Ice Witch with Isabella to the old Holy City and had explicitly told Isabella that she had to act under the watch of another witch during her "prison term". She had willingly accepted this condition. For her, this was already unexpected preferential treatment. She did not have to wear any God's Locket of Retribution or shackles on her hands and feet. Even her clothes were brand new.

After walking into the tent, she saw a woman who stood behind a desk with a smile on her face. "I'm Edith Kant, a member of the Ministry of Defense and temporary commander for the Holy City campaign."

"A great-looking common woman," Isabella thought. "I thought you would control the Hermes Plateau first and then seize the old Holy City."

"That was the original plan, but the army of the Kingdom of Dawn moved faster than we expected." Edith gave a rough explanation of the situation. "His Majesty's order is to ensure the safety of the monasteries, which isn't a problem. The real problematic thing is how to orderly evacuate the orphans from the monasteries. If I remember correctly, they are all nurtured and brought up by the church. I'm afraid it'll hinder our plan if we have to force them out. I think you may have a solution to this problem. After all, His Majesty assigned this task to you before the expedition."

Isabella could not help but frown. "Wait... you said you came here through Cloud Ladder?"

"Yes, is there something wrong?"

"That place is of great importance and is usually heavily guarded. How come there was no one protecting that passage?"

"Is that so?" Edith's voice got deep. "But the merchants thought it was just a little-known, secret passage and Sylvie didn't find anything special about it."

"The church has been based in this place for the past several hundred years and is meticulous about everything here. It's impossible for the church's people to neglect such an important path into the city, which isn't under the control of the city wall." Isabella shook her head. "They just intentionally let the smugglers pass freely and planned to use this passage against the Coalition of the Four Kingdoms during the Months of Demons. Its sentry posts were hidden in natural limestone caves in the mountain. That was why the merchants didn't see any guards there."

"This passage is left unprotected now. Is it because of the breakdown of order in the Holy City?"

"Cloud Ladder is guarded by forces outside the city wall. Theoretically, its sentry posts won't be affected by the situation inside the city. If it's okay with you, I think it's a better idea for me to go to Hermes to have a look." With that being said, Isabella was quite stunned by this situation in her heart. She thought to herself, "Does this look like a breakdown of order? No, it's more like giving up the city and escaping."

"Let's address the issue of the monasteries first," Agatha said. "Is it possible for us to investigate the situation inside them from the sky?"

"Yes, Miss Lightning has examined all three of the main monasteries and found a big issue. It seems that the orphans are organized by someone and are determined to defend their homes to death. That's one of the reasons for us to delay this action." "All my soldiers were unharmed during the battle against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn. I don't want to see any casualties inside the city." Edith said with her hands laid out.

"Somebody organized the orphans?" Isabella pondered for a moment. "Let me go in and talk to them."

"By yourself?"

She was about to say yes but soon realized something was wrong and swallowed her words. Instead, she said, "No, Agatha will go with me."

...

"La-Lady Isabella!" Seeing Isabella, Margie suddenly stood upright and put her right hand on her chest unconsciously.

"I've told you countless times. You're not required to use the courtesy title anymore. Just call me by my name," she said with a straight face. "We're no longer Pure Witches."

"Yes, my lady!" Margie hurriedly nodded.

Isabella secretly sighed. His Majesty had only limited her

movement but did not restrict Margie or Vanilla. These former Pure Witches still kept to their old habits from the monastery and occasionally came to the Foreign Affairs Building to talk with her about the interesting things they discovered in the Witch Union. Fortunately, Agatha did not mind it.

"Take us into the city." She pointed to the city that was not far away.

Margie summoned the Magic Ark and turned back to look at Edith, who came to see them off. "The First Army isn't going with us?"

"They won't go into the old Holy City until you make sure that it's safe."

The ark quickly sank into the ground and the soil above their heads turned into a transparent ceiling. Through it, they could see Lightning who flew in the sky and showed them the way.

There were four monasteries inside the old Holy City, but they could be thought of as a unified institution. They were built around the Reflection Church, linked together by underground tunnels and connected to Secret Temple inside the mountain through a secret path. New witches could be easily sent to the incarnation ceremonies through these underground passages, but they were sealed since a newly awakened Extraordinary had burnt down one of the monasteries.

The Magic Ark quietly sneaked into the outermost monastery, the Western Zone Monastery. Just like Lightning had said, no one was in the huge courtyard except for two skinny girls. They stood at the lobby entrance with spears in their hands, which were much taller than themselves.

"Here we are. Go up now," said Isabella.

"Don't you need to slip in to check first?" Margie asked in surprise.

"No, there are too many hidden God's Stones inside. We don't have to take the risk." Isabella was certain that in important sites such as the monasteries, the church usually placed giant God's Stones, whose power could reach up to 100 steps away and she was unable to eliminate their effects.

The ark swiftly popped out of the ground, causing panic among the guards. In their eyes, these two women seemed to appear out of nothing.

A shrill whistle immediately rang out. All the closed windows were opened one after another and a dozen of nuns that leading a group of orphans swarmed into the courtyard, holding swords, wooden shields, short bows, and hand crossbows. Agatha summoned her Ice in her hand and planned to cover Isabella with it if they began to shoot arrows.

"Wai-Wait! Stop!" Suddenly, the leading nun shouted loudly.

"Are you... the Pure Witch beside the Supreme Pontiff... Lady Isabella?" Another nun asked with a shaky voice.

Hearing this, all the people stopped.

"Yes, it's me." Isabella nodded calmly.

Seeing that these nuns still remembered her, she thought that the task given by His Majesty could be completed smoothly.

However, the next moment she was caught off guard by the abrupt change in their attitudes.

"You really are Lady Isabella! That's great. We're saved!"

"Lady, no, Your Holiness Isabella! Your Holiness, please help us!"

"Supreme Pontiff! Please don't leave us!"

More and more people dropped their weapons, knelt down, and chanted loudly, "Your Holiness."

Chapter 891: The Cloister's Bitterness

"I'm not the pope, Supreme Pontiff was—" Isabella had the urge to refute, but was stopped by Agatha as she placed a hand on her shoulder.

"The task at hand is more important. I don't think His Majesty will mind."

These words seemed irrelevant however Isabella quickly understood what Agatha meant. She knew that this form of deception was a simple solution however these sorts of methods are often seen as a red flag for liege lords that valued power.

Isabella decided as she recalled all the things she seen in Neverwinter and quickly swallowed her disbelief. Instead, she asked, "What do you mean needing us to help you? Where are the Judgement Warriors and priests?

"They all fled!"

"Not exactly, some were recalled to the Holy City!" Another nun refuted.

"We committed crimes. We even killed the priests..."

"That's not her fault!"

"We have no food, no clothes... and we haven't received supplies throughout the past two months. Are we abandoned?"

"Nonsense! Don't you see Her Holiness here?"

The nuns and orphans started to bicker and shout among themselves.

"Quiet! I only need one voice," Isabella shouted impatiently. Her eyes moved over the crowd and then she pointed at a nun who seemed to be their leader, saying, "You first. Arise and tell me."

"Yes, Your Holiness." The nun respectfully pressed her forehead on the ground before laboriously struggling onto her feet. "It's

been over a month since we received news from Hermes..."

It took Isabella around an hour to get an overall understanding of what had happened here.

After the battle of Coldwind Ridge, each day the amount of the supplies the cloister received steadily declined. At first, portions of food decreased, and then delivery times were slashed. Times were hard yet order was maintained, largely thanks to the secure management the three cloisters had adopted and limited information they received from the outside world reducing panic. The priests and Judgement Warriors stationed here encouraged the orphans and nuns to pray more and be strong to get through the hard times claiming that the hard times were almost over.

However, such a time never came.

What the nun had said about church's final order to transfer all the Judgement Warriors and priests back to Hermes was six weeks ago.

The nuns did not exactly know what the order was at the time however they remembered how desperate those believers were. Those who were left behind, looked as if they lost their souls as they left the Great Hall.

Since then, the cloister destabilized.

The institution had vacant positions which would be replaced automatically by lower ranking subordinates. These positions offered the remaining believers the rights to proclaim themselves as the new priests. However they abandoned all the duties and responsibilities a priest had to uphold. Neither did they follow the discipline of saving resources set up by their predecessors. Instead, they wantonly squandered the meagre rations left and even deducted portions that would've gone to the orphans.

It was only when the nuns went to the new priests and bargained for food did they know of monstrous news that the Hermes

Cathedral collapsed.

The church had reached a point where its very existence was at stake.

In order to fight the enemy with all their forces in the last battle, the church's executives decided to give up the old Holy City and recall all formal members to the highland. The last order they gave to the people left in the cloister was to resist the invasion on their own, until the last moment of their lives.

The turn of events seemed too unrealistic to believe, but the fact that the passage leading to the Reflection Church had been sealed off validated the news.

The grievous news had split the nuns into two factions. One called "The new priest faction" consisting of those who were completely disappointed by the old regime. The other faction made up by those who were hesitant and bewildered. The leading nun explained that the church used to be so powerful that there was no need for them to think or even consider their own fates... That was why they were so disturbed by the news. It was like their old, familiar world had suddenly shattered.

It was the new priests' selfish deeds that broke the situation.

Those new priests came from the bottom, and their usual positions were just a little higher than the nuns'. They often assisted the managers to deal with internal affairs without any possible promotion. As a matter of fact, no capable man would be deployed to here. So as soon as they tasted what the power could give them with no one looking over their shoulders, they would naturally become audacious and get out of control.

For example, the "Blessing" of the choir and the ritual class.

In fact, it should have been banned, but because of the Holy City's lax supervision of the cloister. From time to time many dignitaries that had some special interests would come and have

some fun, which was no secret here. It's only when that young extraordinary escaped did the church increase supervision.

However, now that the security is gone, the new priests didn't have to care about punishments.

At first, in the name of "Blessing", only a few girls were forced, then the whole class had to obey, and at last. The situation became so incredibly hideous that the girls had to give their virginity in exchange for food. This kind of behavior not only violated the laws of the church but also pushed away those hesitating nuns and resulted in their alliance with the orphans.

Although girls of different ages were plundered from everywhere in the Four Kingdoms. The nuns had spent time with them, teaching them to read and sing and imparting the knowledge of ethics and rites to them, so naturally they bonded with the girls. That and the order that the church had given them pushed them to defy the new priests. They frequently stole food from the warehouse for the starving girls.

But no matter how much they tried to save the food. They could not stop the decreasing trend of the stock. As priests suspected the nuns' "betrayal", conflicts between them broke out. Two nuns were caught red-handed when they were smuggling food out of the warehouse and were executed by the priest who wanted to intimidate their subordinates. This backfired however and ended up disturbing the rest nuns to revolt. Under one nun's leadership, the nuns and orphans planned and prepared. One night when the priests were indulging in entertainment, they launched an attack. The nuns crushed those priests once and for all.

Additionally through the underground tunnels, the leader got contact with the other two cloisters. Together, they overthrew the disgusting believers in the same way.

When they attempted to send a representative who would find a way to cross the high wall and report the plight here to Hermes,

the army from the Kingdom of Dawn appeared on the border of the old Holy City.

Since they had been abandoned, they had no choice but to resist by themselves. Everyone knew that once the enemy took the cloister, even surrender would not do them any good. That was why Isabella saw them in a hasty defense stance as she came in.

...

Isabella was very confused after she heard the nun's recount.

The corrupt custom in the cloister was not unknown to her, nor was she surprised to see the incompetent believers deprave so quickly after they gained power. However what surprised her was the order from the church.

In order to do battle with the enemy one last time? If that was true, they could never ignore to guard the mountain path if they were intending to give up the outer city walls. It was like they had handed over the first defense line to the enemy voluntarily.

Even though the Holy City had run so short of manpower that it could not keep an eye on the Cloud Ladder. It was impossible for them to bring out any words like "give up the Old Holy City".

Isabella knew, without a doubt that there was a secret area of the church that was hidden from most of the believers. Neither the New Holy City in the highland nor the Old Holy City at the foot of the mountain was the heart of the church. It was the Pivotal Secret Area resting deep under the ground that was the church's one true core, a 400 years old place where they mined the God's Stone, studied the Sigils of Magic Stones, and held the incarnation ceremony of God's Punishment Army.

The Old Holy City had a secret path leading to the Pivotal area, and even the main exit of the path led here. How could they abandon such a crucial site so easily?

The order was full of flaws, a complete lie!

Chapter 892: Appreciated

There must be someone lying, the church or the nuns.

Isabella could not think of any reasons for the nuns to make up an order, since they were abandoned and discarded. Judging from their pale, emaciated look, she estimated that probably one more fortnight of starvation would kill them all.

But if the church was lying, what were they going to do by recalling all the formal members to Hermes and leaving the Cloud Ladder and the Old Holy City unguarded?

Trying to set aside her speculation, Isabella looked at the leading nun and asked, "What should I call you?"

"I am called Qiu, Your Holiness."

"Haven't you ever thought of getting out of here?"

"What, why?" The nun seemed surprised.

"Granted that the walls are high and the gate is thick, they're not impassable. Six weeks should have been long enough for all of you to make a wooden ladder or stack the firewood at the bottom of the gate to burn the planks and melt the chain. You're free to do anything that could get yourself out of here," Isabella said confused whilst trying to ascertain the validity of the situation. "Since you could send a representative to report to Hermes, why didn't you get out of here together? With the food supplies severed, you're facing a certain death even without the army of the Kingdom of Dawn's invasion."

It took Qiu a long moment to come back from silence. She muttered, "Where... Where could we possibly go if we leave here?"

All the residents of the cloister lowered their heads at the question.

"I've never left the cloister..."

"Nor have I."

"Although there's not much, at least we have something to eat. I don't think the outside world would be better." Some orphans joined in.

"If we start to beg for food, then our lives will revert back to the one we used to have."

"The book told us that we shouldn't take begging for granted."

"I don't... want to live like that anymore."

Looking at their bewildered looks, Isabella finally realized that it was not the church's order that bound them. They knew nothing else but their sheltered life. The situation seemed neither good nor bad. It would be easy to cope with the nuns. Just kill the ones who were still loyal to the Holy City and be done with it. But if all the orphans here had become obstinately loyal, that would become a thorn to His Majesty.

"I have one more question." Isabella drew a deep breath and asked in a low voice, "Why do you address me as the Supreme Pontiff?"

"Well..." Qiu looked intimidated. She hesitated for a while before saying, "Pope Mayne was dead, and so were the three archbishops. There's no new nomination declared in Hermes, so according to the institution. We have to promote all the subordinates to fill in the gaps, you're the one closest to the holy temple."

"Pope Isabella! Please help us!"

"Please don't leave us behind. We'll bear whatever punishment you'll give us!"

"Please take us back to Hermes!"

Again, the nuns started to plead.

"It appears that they did not call me Her Holiness for anything particular, but for the chance to regain the church's attention,"

Isabella thought. The institution was not suitable for the top-level executives in the church as they were already at the top. However the ones who were drowning at the bottom of the hierarchy could not care less. They would clutch anything that could save their lives as tight as they could, even if it was a fragile straw.

As Isabella thought of this, she weaved an idea in her head. "I'm here to tell you an important thing. Listen carefully!"

All of them held their breaths.

"The church has changed," Isabella said loudly. "Mayne was no real pope. He not only betrayed Lord O'Brien but also stole the throne! In fact, there was another successor to whom Lord O'Brien meant to pass his power."

The words were like a stone that created numerous ripples as it was tossed into the water. The listeners burst into an uproar.

"The successor was his first Pure Witch, Zero," Isabella said. She did not know what His Majesty would think of those words, but since she started off, she would do her best. "Graycastle isn't our enemy. Instead, in order to defend the real enemy, Lord O'Brien even hope to ally the church with Graycastle."

"Do you mean... the demonic beasts?" Someone could not help asking.

"They're more fearful than the demonic beasts." Isabella shook her head and said, "They're recorded in canon within the church that only a very few people could see. Mayne was averse to let the Pure Witch seize the power, so he secretly revolted and framed Zero who was about to leave for Graycastle as a messenger. That's the cause for the battle of Coldwind Ridge." Fortunately, Mayne's trick didn't work out. I survived that battle, yet the initiators of the rebellion died within more than a month. There was no doubt that they were punished by the deities."

"There's no so-called last battle, and you don't need to hold the

cloister alone to the last moment, either," she paused. "You're safe now."

Both the nuns and the orphans looked as though they could not believe their ears.

"What about... our punishment... for killing the priests?"

"They had dishonored their names and therefore disqualified for what they had done, so I decided spare all of you."

There was a moment of silence. Then they started to cheer wildly. "Thank you! Your Merciful Holiness!"

"Long live Pope Isabella!"

"Long live Your Holiness"

Isabella pressed her palms downward to make them calm down before she continued, "Just as I said, I'm no pope. The rules don't really make me attain the that role. I'm just the executor of Supreme Pontiff, as I was before."

"But you still represent the Church of Hermes!" Qiu said, thrilled.

"I have a mission for you," Isabella said clearly and with certainty. "Of course, that's after all of you eat your fill."

The nuns and the orphans knelt again after hobbling back to their feet. They said as one, "At your service."

Isabella knew very well that those people did not side with her because they were convinced by her. They had been forsaken and should have been done for. Now that they were given the hope to return to the church, they naturally would devote anything, even if the "church" they would know now was not real.

Supposing that the real Church of Hermes was still standing, they might mull over whether they had made the right choice after they removed themselves from the plight and cooled down. But that was impossible now. By the time the First Army arrived, what she had said would definitely come true.

Only by breaking their old beliefs of the church and instilling a half-true story she had made up as the new "truth". King Roland would now be able to control this land veritably.

"It's very simple. I want you to restore order in the Old Holy City," Isabella said methodically. "Qiu, first gather the residents of the two other cloisters and retell them my words. You must also see to it that every child gets their portion of food before nightfall. The First Army of Graycastle will answer your call and help you. Since they had known that it was Mayne and other men who betrayed, they wouldn't make things difficult for you. After that, all of you must walk out and inform every household of the news and note the names of whom have left and stayed respectively. If you run into the treasonous priests or the believers, report to me immediately."

As the orders were given, the nuns went into action right after they answered the "yes". The situation they were in did not magically improve but a new outlook and hope dwindle in their eyes.

Soon, they ripped down the gate. When a nun was about to take the girls out of the cloister in order, one girl suddenly bowed low to Isabella.

"Thank you, Lady Isabella."

The other girls followed her behavior one after another.

"You're so nice, My Lady."

"I'll remember you forever."

Every girl in the line echoed these kinds of words.

"Thanking me..." Isabella slightly closed her eyes, lost in thought. She had received much hatred and many curses since the day she became a Pure Witch, yet this was the first time she was being thanked.

But what she had done was not for gaining gratitude, but for her

goal. She would also put those people to death without the slightest hesitation if that was needed to achieve her goal. So... this kind of gratitude seemed unwanted to her.

Although that was she had been thinking, Isabella felt like something unknown emerged in her heart, a feeling she had never had before. She could feel a soft distension occurring in her heart and warmth like a fire. Isabella thought she would resist the feeling, but... it was not as annoying as she had expected.

Was this King Roland's intention?

Isabella slightly lets out a breath and then slowly followed the end of the line to the camp.

Chapter 893: Fate Passes On

Two weeks later when summer was already nearing its end, Roland finally arrived at Hermes.

He was welcomed at the gates of the Holy City by the witches and the First Army garrison from the Northern Region. He also spotted several nuns in black church clothing amongst the group of people.

Although Roland had heard from Lightning that all the top-level figures of the church had disappeared, he still couldn't believe what had happened as he entered this now empty stronghold. The fierce battle that he thought awaited them did not come. Neither the God's Punishment Witches nor the new mortars had to be used. There was no doubt that things couldn't have gone any better, but this turn of events just felt somewhat anticlimactic for Roland.

He had made a right decision in letting Isabella come along with the First Army to this expedition. According to the reports from Eagle Face and Agatha, the former Pure Witch was quickly alerted to the strange happenings within the Church and promptly suggested the army to investigate the Holy City of Hermes right after they finished taking care of the orphans in the cloisters.

To their surprise, the entire city was empty except for the people who lived in the surrounding areas. They didn't get to leave in time, thus creating a facade that the church was still under operations. In reality, those people had no idea about what was really happening in the inner city, and all they heard was that the church was preparing for the last battle.

After that, the nuns, organized by Isabella, entered Hermes and visited as many houses as possible to explain the situation. As a result, the number of evacuees started to decrease, and at least no more large groups of people were spotted fleeing towards Wolfheart and Everwinter. The church abandoning the Holy City

was such a shocking turn of events for the people, and it had utterly ruined the church's reputation. Compared to those cowards who ran at the first sign of danger, the nuns who came out and tried to restore order seemed more like the real successors of the old church.

"How did they escape?" Roland could not help asking. The message he had received did not include many details, so Roland wanted to know where the remnants of the church had gone. "There ought to be thousands of people in the Inner City. How could they have managed to leave the plateau without passing through the city wall?"

"There are many tunnels under Hermes, some of which go under the city wall. If they evacuated in batches, it would have been possible for them to escape without alerting the residents in the outer city." Isabella explained. "The tunnels were designed to work only one-way so that intruders wouldn't be able 't take advantage of it. Moreover, the tunnels can only be used once. I've checked a lot of tunnel entrances, and most of them were already destroyed."

"Where do the tunnels lead to?"

"Only people who have used them would know," Isabella said as she shook her head. "If they had planned the escape beforehand, it would be near impossible to track them now that they already had six weeks to run."

"So the church is like a cornered lizard, cutting off its tail to escape, and hoping for a chance to come back in the future?" Roland frowned as he pondered over this. "But giving up the Holy City meant that they abandoned their base of operations, which is far worse than just losing a tail, as this was as good as them losing everything. How could they be so confident that they would be able to find a new base that can rival Graycastle? Or are they going to scatter into different places and harass my land?" Thinking about how he had to keep an eye out for fanatical believers in the coming years gave Roland a headache.

"No need to worry, Your Majesty. They won't come back anymore," Isabella smiled, as she read Roland's mind.

"Why?" Roland was surprised.

Isabella replied, "They left behind a messenger."

...

In a small church on the north side of the Holy City, Roland met the messenger that Isabella mentioned.

He was a grizzled old man in a brand new red priest robe hemmed with gold. Seized by two guards, he walked out with a thick book held in his arms.

The old man hobbled towards them unsteadily, but he kept his chin up as he tried to strike an imposing figure. He cast a cold glance at Isabella and then looked at Roland. "Are you the King of Graycastle, Roland Wimbledon?"

"Yes, that is I."

"You have your father's grey hair and grey eyes," the old man said slowly. "My name is Jacob, the High Priest of the Holy City. In your terms, my position would be similar to that of a duke. ... But of course, I don't own any land, nor do I need that many servants."

"I heard that you've insisted on waiting for me here?" Roland shrugged. "What happened? Why didn't they take you with them when they turned tail?"

"I wanted to stay." the old man said solemnly as if these were his last words. "I'm too old to run... Even if I could go with them, there won't be much time left for me. I'd rather be buried in this city than start a new but short life."

"New life?" Roland quickly seized the keywords.

"Yes. Let go all of all of our duties and live a new and peaceful life for the rest of our days." Jacob's voice sounded satirical. "You've won, Your Majesty. The church won't be fighting against you

anymore. This city will become yours with everything intact, and so will our nightmares. if you so desire."

"Oh?" Roland said noncommittally.

"What other reasons do you think that made us guard this barren plateau?" The old man's voice rose. "Look what you've done. Humans are going to perish because of you!"

"Really? What a harsh accusation. However, I don't see why I have to bear it." Roland said as he roughly understood the High Priest's intention. Surely enough, the church would not let him take the city so easily, and even though they did not have the force to fight back, they would try to obstruct him mentally. Zero had tried the same trick before the final battle between them, although their intentions were different. If Roland knew nothing about the Battle of Divine Will, then the news about how the demons would soon annihilate humankind would have definitely taken him by surprise. Additionally, if the church manipulated the truth and made it seem like he was at fault for mankind's imminent destruction, then they would have succeeded in breaking his will."

"Accusation? Sigh... what gibberish. Do I look like I'm kidding? O, young and untested King, it appears that Her Holiness, the Pure Witch didn't tell you the truth." Jacob gave Isabella a meaningful look before he continued. "The church was laden with a heavy responsibility that is beyond imagination and is unknown to all but a few superiors of the church. You have no idea what kind of enemy we've been preparing to fight over the past few centuries. Now that you've ruined the church, like it or not, you must take full responsibility for what is going to happen. When the end comes for us all, you will only be able to helplessly watch on as your kingdom get razed to the ground!"

"It seems that this man is not only attempting to attack me mentally but is also trying to take any opportunities to alienate me from Isabella. It's a shame that he has misjudged me and sent the wrong signals." As Roland looked at the self-righteous old priest,

an old quote came to mind: All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

"You don't have to believe me, but a truth is a truth." As the priest said this, another sentence emerged in Roland's head: People die if they are killed. Jacob let out a long breath after he finished those words. He then flipped open the book in his hands and handed it over, saying, "This is the Canon of the church. You'll understand all the foolish things you've done after you read it! Our... no, I should say the human beings' real enemy is—"

"The demons, right?" Roland chipped in casually. "You built the Holy City here not to fight against the demonic beasts, but for the God's Stone mines in the mountain. There's a Pivotal Secret Area under the cathedral, where you mined the God's Stones and made the God's Punishment Army, and that's the true form of the church. Of course, I don't know if you've learned this information, for only the pope was entitled to know of the incarnation ceremony of the God's Punishment Army. Oh, were you going to tell me the Battle of Divine Will or the Divine Smile? The battle that occurs every 400 or so is no news to me. Furthermore, the demons are not some invisible ghosts either. In fact, I've fought against them before. So... what else do you want me to know?"

"You—I—" At the moment, Jacob was so shocked that he opened his mouth, stammered, yet failed to make out any words. He looked like he would pass out at any moment. After a while, he pointed his shaking finger at Isabella and said, "It's you..."

But Isabella shook her head softly. "I didn't tell him that," she said, "From the very beginning, he knew much more than we had expected. You have underestimated him, or more like, we all did."

"Now that you've finished your story, let me tell you mine," Roland said, giving a cold laugh.

Chapter 894: Worthy To Save The World

Since there were still some First Army soldiers present, Roland omitted the origin of the Battle of Divine Will in his story. He briefed the old man only on the part of the history of how the witch empire of old had transformed into the church.

Despite the fact that Roland had only briefly mentioned bits and pieces of the story that he knew, Jacob was still shocked when he realized just how much Roland already knows about humanity's past. His eyes widened every time the church's highly confidential information just slipped out of Roland's mouth as if it was worth nothing. In the end, Jacob's eyes got so large that they looked like a pair of lanterns. Every time the old man wanted to refute what Roland had said, his words would end up being caught on his lips. A lot of what Roland said was beyond his understanding, yet it all fit perfectly with the rumors that went around within the church.

Roland paused as he saw the old priest gasping for breath. He didn't stop talking because he had nothing else to say, but out of concern for the old guy who looked like he would pass out any second now. Of course, Roland didn't really care if the old man were to pass out; he just wanted to enjoy the face-smacking some more.

He did not continue until Jacob had finally caught his breath. "It looks like you were never told about the inner workings of the church. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been so shaken by these trivial facts. You can't berate me for talking nonsense even if you want to because you can't help but find what I said just now similar to the clues you have found out yourself in the past. I believe that all the knowledge of the demons and the Battle of Divine Will had been passed down by generation after generation by the popes, to keep the goal... or should I say, the faith, unforgotten. However, the current fools who call themselves the successor of the church have a fear of witches that runs so deep, that they dare not reveal

the truth of the past. Not to mention the will of the first Pope. You people proclaim to be fighting for humanity, yet how many believers in the entire Holy City of Hermes are even aware of the existence of the demons and the upcoming Battle?"

"But this isn't how things are run in Graycastle. Information about the Battle of Divine Will is no secret in Neverwinter. Every minister working under me knows of the demons. The planning and preparation for the upcoming Battle of Divine Will form one of Neverwinter's fundamental policies. Be it farmers or blacksmiths, all my subjects are doing their best in contributing to the inevitable fight against evil. That's the largest difference between us. I've been preparing Graycastle to withstand the onslaught of our enemy for years." Roland took in the look of distraught apparent on the old man's face with joy before he continued, "Do you still think that the church is the one and only savior of humankind? Don't you think you've been thinking too highly of yourselves? Even if we set aside the fact of whether or not I will be able to come out victorious against this powerful enemy, one thing is still for certain—"

He walked over to the old priest and spelled out his next words slowly, "How can the church hope to save the world when they can't even defeat me? Stop dreaming!"

"We..." Roland's words had caused Jacob's face to turn pale as if the last sentence had pierced through his heart. Jacob had indeed questioned the church's strength in his mind before, but he had always kept his doubts hidden. Now that the truth was brutally shoved in front of his face, he had lost even the last bits of his remaining determination.

The old priest then felt strength leave his legs and he collapsed on to the floor, and the dignified look deserving of a respectful figure that he initially displayed quickly disappeared from his face without a trace.

"Take him back to the dungeons," Roland ordered, waving one

hand. "He is too old to work in the mines. Keep him alive until the Bloody Moon comes and have him witness how my people fight against the demons. I hope by then he would still remember how to repent to God."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The soldiers pulled Jacob up and carried him away by his arms.

Roland turned to look at Isabella and said, "Well done. Without you, we wouldn't have restored order in the Holy City in such a short time."

Isabella, being unlike her usual self, looked away from her King and said in a slightly shaky voice, "Is this really okay? Do you really want me to be the one to give the orders as the Pope's representative and gather those who were abandoned?"

He had received reports from Edith, Eagle Face, and Isabella herself, and understood their proposal to rewrite history to split up the church once and for all. The Pearl of the Northern Region had praised this move, saying that it would help Graycastle conquer both the old and the new Holy City and take over all the influence that the church had accumulated over the centuries. Even if the scattered believers somehow found themselves an opportunity to start up a new organization, they would look like illegitimate rogues in comparison to Roland who had actual control over Hermes.

Roland, on the other hand, looked at this move in a more practical way. Located in the middle of the Impassable Mountain Range and facing the big breach, this piece of plateau would be a major choke point for them to defend in the Battle of Divine Will. Roland had intended to take over the place since the day he planned to wage war on Hermes. Now that they could utilize the local workforce and resources to their advantage and cut down expenditures for Neverwinter, Roland didn't see why they shouldn't go ahead with the plan.

"What would I have to mind if what you did turns out to be effective?" Roland said, smiling. "However, your sentence still stands."

"I never had that kind of intention..." Isabella said hurriedly.

"But of course, I can't leave you unrewarded for your help either." Roland waved his hands and said, "If there's ever a day when you're required to intervene as a representative, then in that day you shall be treated properly, in a way that is befitting of a representative. What do you think?"

"In a way that... is befitting of a representative?"

"The representative would be equivalent in status to the Prime Minister or the Hand of the King." Roland smiled. "Of course, this wouldn't give you the equivalent authority or power, but only the accommodation and food, such as a commodious, a posh suite, delicacies served by imperial cooks, all the Chaos Drinks you could ever desire, and more. If you don't want them, you're allowed to take an equivalent amount of gold royals—"

"No, Your Majesty." Isabella shook her head. "The former is good. I mean... just have it your way."

"Well, that's settled then," Roland said pleasantly.

...

As the main body of the First Army joined in the investigation in the city, the detailed workings of the foreign city slowly became clear before Roland.

To his surprise, the old priest did not exaggerate when he said: "with everything intact." Apart from the collapsed Hermes Cathedral, all the buildings were in excellent condition. Even the broken parts of the city wall had been repaired, and the mangonels that stood upon the wall were left untouched.

In addition, a large number of Berserk Pills that Isabella had mentioned in her report rested quietly in the underground cellar.

According to the inventory count that they made, there were around 240,000 pills in total. Thinking that Zero planned to use millions of berserk soldiers to fight against the demons, Roland was relieved that her plan never came to fruition.

After the inventory count, they set up a big fire on the high city wall to burn the pills into ashes that were eventually swept down off the wall and left frozen in the dirt. At last, the threat of a crazed army that had bothered him all this time eventually came to an end.

But the investigation report included some even more interesting things.

Such as, food.

And weapons.

Every day since the investigation began, the First Army would find new hidden goods that had been amassed in frightening amounts. The resources they have found so far were enough to equip and maintain several orders of knights. No wonder that Appen Moya, the King of Dawn, and his feudatories were willing to travel thousands of miles to plunder this city. Roland noticed that the top-level executives of the church had only taken the gold royals and jewels, leaving most of the war supplies untouched, which partly proved that they would no longer return and were instead fleeing away to start a new unfettered life.

The leviathan that nested in the northwest of Graycastle had finally bitten the dust.

Roland had a lot of free time now. All he needed to do was to wait for Iron Axe to annex the Eastern Region and march the army to the border of their neighboring country where they could join forces. After that, they would work together to outflank the Kingdom of Dawn.

With free time he didn't usually have, Roland wanted to look

around the city that the church had run for hundreds of years. After all, the Holy City of Hermes was incomplete in the memory fragment.

The place he would like to visit the most would undoubtedly be the place of the phantom, the Reflection Church that Isabella had told him before. It was said that it was by phantom playback that Alice, the Queen of Starfall City, managed to pass down her faith across hundreds of years. That was also the place where Zero finished her transformation from a Pure Witch to the Pope.

Chapter 895: Reflections of The Past

In a way, the Reflection Church was not only the place for the transition of power between Popes, but also a museum.

The busts of the past influential figures of the church radiated historical significance, not to mention the Sigil of Magic Stones which could replay major historical events in the form of holographic images.

If it were to become a tourist attraction for future generations, it would definitely be very profitable.

But if Roland wanted to enter it now, he would have to spend quite an effort—although the Reflection Church was right beneath the old Holy City church in a totally mirrored way, the two churches were not connected. The slate and clay between them were as thick as 10 meters with God's Stones of Retaliation mixing in the wall, so forcefully digging through with manpower or phasing through it by using the Magic Ark would both be extremely troublesome.

After inquiring about the details with Isabella, Roland decided to instead enter the Reflection Church through the tunnels under the cloister.

After all, those tunnels used to be unobstructed. Although they were purposely sabotaged and blocked, it would still be easy for the Magic Ark to go through them. More importantly, the abandoned tunnels were not under the influence of God's Stones. Compared with the entire cave that was under the influence of the God's Stone mineral vein, the tunnels seemed to be a much safer and reliable choice.

To avoid getting lost, Roland asked Sylvie to scan the whole underground structure to determine the best route for this sightseeing trip.

The witches were alerted by all the preparation that was going on and so learned about Roland's upcoming trip. On the day of his departure, Roland found a crowd of people gathering outside his tent, with the little girl, Lightning, being the most excited of them all.

"Your Majesty, how can you leave me behind for such an important expedition!" She pouted after saying that as she felt that she had been wronged. "Am I not your chief explorer?"

"Coo, coo! Adventure, coo!" Maggie agreed.

"Um... this is only a sightseeing tour. There won't be anything exciting in the places where Popes conduct the transition of power, let alone any danger."

"But I want to go with you... can I?" the little girl asked with her sparkly puppy eyes.

How was Roland supposed to say no to this?

Now that the floodgates were opened, the witches' requests came one after another.

"Your Majesty, take me too," Hummingbird asked in a low voice. "I can help you with the luggage."

"As a member of the Quest Society, how can I miss such a key moment. Am I right, Your Majesty?" Agatha asked.

"I'll go wherever elder sister Anna goes!" Nana said with a clear voice.

"What if the underground building is infected by the demonic plague? Didn't you say that places which lack ventilation are the perfect environments for bacteria to grow?" Lily asked seriously.

"Since the Queen of Starfall City is there, I'd like to see her again..." Apart from the witches, even No. 76 Phyllis came to express her desire to join.

"Wait a moment, was she not an enemy of Taquila?" Roland

curiously asked.

"But she was still a respectable leader—if not for Lady Alice, we wouldn't have even survived until the split between Taquila and Starfall City."

... In the end, pretty much everyone was able to get the free trip to the Reflection Church that they wished for.

Originally, Roland only planned to take Anna, Nightingale, Sylvie, and Isabella with him. But now, due to the increase in participants, Margie had to go back and forth several times before she was able to transport everybody into the abandoned tunnel.

Although these complex tunnels were shut down long ago, they were still in good conditions, with no sign of leakage or erosion. Although the tunnels were quite dusty, the group still traveled through them without much of a hitch.

After walking for about fifteen minutes, they arrived at the upper region of the Reflection Church. Under the guidance of Isabella, they soon arrived at a grand hall. The hall's width was nothing impressive, but the ceiling extended so far that Roland could only see the pillars extend into the darkness above.

In other words, its height was much greater than its width.

Despite its grandness, Roland felt claustrophobic the moment he entered the hall. It felt like he was walking through an extremely deep valley. Even though Stones of Lighting illuminated both sides, their faint yellow light was only able to light up a small part of the hall.

"This is the Prayer Room. The portraits of all the previous Popes are hung on the walls of this hall." Isabella explained while walking, "On the day of power transition, O'Brien, taking Mayne, visited here too. But the Archbishop did not know that O'Brien took someone else with him."

"That was Zero," Roland said with a low voice.

"Yes. Normally, a Pure Witch would strictly be forbidden from entering this area; even the witches used to instill magic in the Sigils were chosen from those soon-to-be sacrificed. As soon as they saw the phantoms, they would then go through the God's Punishment Army's incarnation ceremony." Isabella nodded. "The moment that Zero arrived here, she had become a candidate for the Pope."

"Disgusting!" Nightingale snarled, although it was unsure whether she was referring to the incarnation ceremony or Zero.

Isabella shut her mouth sensibly.

When everybody arrived at the end of the hall, a full-length portrait taking up the entire wall appeared in front of them. Different from the passage under the dim yellow light, this portrait's frame was surrounded by Stones of Light. Every detail of the portrait was vividly exhibited under the soft light.

Although Roland had heard many times about the appearance of the Queen of Witches from Agatha and other witches, when he saw her portrait with his own eyes, an unspeakable feeling rose from his heart.

In the portrait, Alice was holding a sword with both hands and looking at the front. She looked as if gazing into the unpredictable future, while at the same time examining Roland.

There was no single word that can describe her accurately. She was soft yet strong; cold yet fiery. One could never forget her as soon as one laid eyes upon her. However, if a pretty face was all that she had, Roland would not have been too surprised. On Alice, there was the overwhelming aura of a natural leader—an aura so intense it seemed as if she was born with God's Honor; leading her followers to victory until the end of time.

"What a beautiful woman," Anna said with complicated feelings. "Fortunately, she's gone."

"Hey, what do you mean by that?" Roland patted her head slightly. "Even if Alice were alive, would I have been head over heels for her?"

But seeing Nightingale who was by his side, he decided not to voice out his thoughts.

I have nothing to hide, but if... if she judged that what I said was not the whole truth or partly-true-partly-false, what can I do then?

After appreciating the looks of the Queen of Starfall City, they walked into the Illusion Room concealed behind the giant painting.

"Nine Sigils of Magic Stones are stored here. I haven't seen all of them. Some of them seem to have been passed down from the older generations." Isabella pressed at a Magic Stone. "If you wish to see all of them, I'll activate them one by one."

"Then let's begin." Roland nodded.

Their surroundings suddenly became pitch-dark.

Chapter 896: Dust-laden Secrets

In the darkness, Roland felt that two hands had simultaneously grabbed him. Nightingale said alertly, "What's going on?"

"The illusion created by this sigil is directly projected into everyone's brain," Agatha explained. "It will seem like you have been teleported to another world alone, but the reality is unaffected. We're still standing in the grand hall."

"If you don't want to watch it, you can just walk out of the effective range of the sigil" Isabella added.

Not long after, the darkness gradually faded away, and the transparent glass dome, marble floor, and spacious roundtable appeared in front of their eyes. Sitting around the table were witches in the Union-style copes, among them was the impressive Queen of Starfall City whose hair was as fiery red. Although this was a scene from 400 years ago, everything in the phantom looked so realistic. Even the tea on the table was giving off puffs of hot steam. It felt as if a moment that had long been buried history had been revived to the present once again.

If such a technique had existed from where Roland came from, historians who had worked their asses off in the dirt to search for a few pieces of text fragments would definitely be moved to tears.

Seeing that there was no danger, one hand let go of Roland. However, the other one did not loosen its grip at all, but instead moved down and eventually the two's fingers were tightly intertwined with each other.

Roland instantly knew who that was.

He smiled and softly squeezed the other person's fingers before he shifted his attention to the center of the phantom.

Isabella activated the magic stones one after another. The locations in the phantoms changed from the witches' escape route

to Taquila, then to Starfall City. As Alice became younger and younger, the appearing witches kept on changing, and by the end, only a few familiar faces could be seen. Undoubtedly, during this prolonged brutal war, the Union suffered tremendous losses, and very few senior witches were able to survive until the escape.

This was the result of the witch empire's systemic flaw: the more powerful a witch was, the higher ranked she would be. It sounded logical, but when war erupted, the high-ranking witches had to fight on the front lines themselves, instead of commanding the war effort from somewhere safe. Roland had heard from Agatha that Alice evolved into a Transcendent during an extremely dangerous battle. During her reign, she went through several massive battles just like that one. In other words, if she had made even a single mistake, then the history of the Union... or maybe even the history of the entire human race would have turned out differently.

Such was the case for the Head of the Three Chairs, let alone the other high-ranking witches.

As a matter of fact, that system did not provide a suitable place for leaders to be developed—a rookie only had to survive one or two battles and taste some fresh blood to become a veteran, yet a high-ranking officer had to go through quite a few battles and witness thousands of deaths to genuinely mature. Having the leader personally lead a charge was indeed the best way of enhancing an army's morale, but this should only be used as a last resort. If everything went well, the troops would keep on fighting with high morale without the need for a leader to make an appearance.

Leaders and common troops do not have the same value—when faced with a large-scale war where large numbers of casualties were inevitable, such a practice was truly reckless.

Roland was not expecting to find any astonishing secrets through the sigils. He believed the past Popes must have repeatedly

watched these phantoms, so if there were records about the origins of the Divine Will or the nature of the relics of gods, then the church wouldn't have fallen to such a sorry state today. The purpose of his trip was, apart from satisfying his curiosity, to gain some more experiences for himself.

He found that what had happened was more or less the same as he had imagined. As the phantom played out, the group mostly saw scenes such as important conferences, festivals, and battle mobilizations. It was understandable that the Sigils of Magic Stones were only used on such occasions.

According to Agatha, sigils that were able last for such a long time cost quite a fortune.

Soon enough, they came to the last phantom—Alice and the other two chairs were nowhere to be found, and instead, there was a crowd of senior witches in disheveled clothing. The image quality was also visibly worst than the previous playbacks.

Agatha asked with surprise, "Are those people..."

"The founders of the early Union?" Phyllis asked.

"Who are they?" Roland asked, raising his eyebrow.

"The Extraordinaries who survived the first Battle of Divine Will. It was them who founded the Union. Look at the documents on the table! Could this be..." Phyllis asked in surprise.

"Indeed." Agatha's voice was full of joy. "I never expected to witness the well-known vow of the three queens with my very own eyes!"

Roland was bewildered. He raised his head and tried to get a better look, only to find texts written with magic power, which were only readable to witches.

"Can someone explain what the vows were about?"

"Allow me." Agatha's voice came from in front of him. "It was

considered as a symbolic event in the history of the Union where this loose organization integrated into a centralized power. This event was something every awakened witch had to learn about. After the end of the first Battle of Divine Will, the Union, which was entirely under the witches' rule, was founded. At that time, different opinions were circling around the young organization, whether it was about the ruling of ordinary people or the methods of fighting against demons. Such debates lasted for years until three major powers emerged. Over time, the three forces grew until they finally overpowered the other lords and city-states, after which the Union ended up with the oligarchic organizational structure that we all know about."

"Were the three powers Starfall City, Taquila, and Arrieta?" Nightingale asked.

"That's right. Due to the special positions of these three Holy Cities, their lords were often crowned as 'Queen,'" Agatha replied. "The Three Chiefs of the last tenure in the Union were the Queen of Starfall City Alice, the Queen of Sunchaser Natalia, and the Queen of Moonradiance Eleanor."

"No wonder." Roland thought. To witches in that era, the vow of the three queens was more or less the same as the founding constitutional amendments of a nation. This event signified the point after which the Union had transformed from an unofficial alliance to a unified political entity. No wonder witches like Agatha and Phyllis were this excited about the vow. Indeed, it had important historical significance. Although the Union ended up in a disaster, without the Three Chiefs system, it would have been defeated much sooner in the second Battle of Divine Will, let alone leaving behind the numerous witches who took on "resisting demons, recovering Taquila" as their lifelong mission.

But such information was not particularly interesting to Roland. With his mind drifting away, he laid eyes on the minor details in the phantom such as the witches' clothing, the cups and stationery

they used, and the furniture and decoration in the hall. Since Alice came from a time several centuries ago, the furnishings of her age were much shabbier. Obviously, after the defeat of the first Battle of Divine Will, the domain of the witches ended up in an extremely underdeveloped stage.

On the walls of the conference hall, Roland saw over ten portraits, and surprisingly, two of them were men. He guessed that they were probably some outstanding heroic figures from the war.

Apparently, at that time, the Union hadn't started to consider ordinary people as lower beings, since men could still attend such an important conference.

Just when Roland was about to ask Agatha whether she knew who they were, he felt as if all the blood in his body suddenly froze.

An indescribable chill rose from the bottom of his feet and penetrated through his spine. The panic was so intense that goosebumps sprung on his arms and his fingertips started to shiver slightly.

"What's wrong?" noticing his uneasiness, Anna asked urgently.

"That, that painting..." swallowing his saliva, Roland was able to barely stutter out his words.

"Painting?"

"The person in the painting... I've seen her before."

It took him quite a lot of effort to utter those words—although the phantom was not as clear as the previous ones, he could still distinguish the silhouette of the person in the second to the last portrait. It was a middle-aged woman, not outstanding in appearance, with her black hair coiled on the top of her head, one of her eyes covered with a patch, and was sitting on a high-backed chair with her hands crossed over each other.

Her appearance was exactly the same as Lan, Garcia's master in Roland's Dream World!

Chapter 897: Jungle Fiesta

The heavy rain in the jungle had washed away most of the corpses' bloody smell.

An ordinary hunter might have found it hard to search for his target under this kind of condition. But for Lorgar, the faint smells that were mixed with the rainwater were more than sufficient for her to hunt.

For example, she knew that a number of animals had died at the same spot. She could sense that the within the different smells of blood, some still smelled fresh, while others carried a rancid odor. This means that several animals had all died at the same place for some time.

It was unlikely for the smell of small animals such as rabbits, rats, and foxes to spread for so far, and even if it did, the smell shouldn't have been so distinct. In other words, this scent most likely came from the carcasses of large animals no smaller than bulls or horses.

The creature that dragged all these large animal carcasses around must have possessed a certain level of strength. Mass storing food this way was also a frequent habit among the carnivorous predators.

Such places were often the nest of these predators.

Most importantly, Lorgar caught an indescribably foul smell within the stench of blood. This was the smell unique to those of hybrid demonic beasts. Had she not turned into a wolf, she would've been only able to smell some odor in the end. Only when she used her ability to transform could she detect the subtle differences in the damp air.

There was a hint of magic power in that smell.

Not every demonic hybrid could absorb magic power, but this

one must be a demonic hybrid since its blood contained traces of magic power, making the beast much stronger than ordinary demonic beasts.

It was also one of the improvements she made through hunting in the jungle for these past few months.

If she could have mastered this technique before the holy duel, the Four-winged Eagle that attacked her from the air wouldn't have even been able to touch her.

Although the climate, the environment, and the preys in the Barbarian Land were far different from those in the desert, the technique for hunting was fairly similar. Basically, when it came to hunting, it was all down to being cautious, meticulous and patient no matter where he or she was.

Lorgar's current target was a large demonic hybrid bear.

When it stood up, its height was as tall as three men standing atop one another, and it looked like a mobile iron tower. Lorgar could not tell which demonic beast it managed to integrate with. The monster's skin was as thick as armor and could not be bitten through even by her sharp fangs. Its head looked even crazier. It had four eyes, two in the back, which made her sure-kill techniques such as a sneak attack from the back and biting the throat lose their usual effect.

Five days ago, Lorgar had encountered the demonic bear. After a harsh fight, she broke two claws while the bear lost half of its forefoot and ran away with its stomach cut open. This bear-like beast was probably the trickiest prey to deal with within the Barbarian Land ever since Lorgar had gotten there. It was just about as strong as the legendary beast of the desert. If this monstrosity were instead the first opponent that she had to face after arriving in the Barbarian Land, then she would have been the one running for her life. But now, things are different. She was able to get plenty of battle experience from all the other demonic

beasts she had killed before this.

Nevertheless, it was a hunt. Not a duel. She brought herbs cultivated by Leaf and the Cleansing Water made by Lily for this trip. Also, she did not need to worry about minor injuries as she had excellent healing ability after transforming into a wolf. During these days, apart from healing the wounds, she spent the rest of time searching for the demonic bear.

As the smell became stronger and stronger, Lorgar knew that the chase was about to come to an end, and the victor would soon be decided.

She lightly jumped across a puddle. Her paws sank into the wet mud without any sound. She chose to start her attack from a downwind position since this would make it difficult for the beast to detect her presence through smell. She approached the source of the bloody little by little, pinpointed the position of the enemy using her hearing, and slowly lifted the vines in front of her with her front paw.

The demonic hybrid bear then appeared in front of her.

It was not aware of her arrival as it was busily biting into a stout buck, with blood stains on both of its cheeks. The bear's broken limbs that exposed the bones inside made the scene look even more appalling. For ordinary animals that suffered such severe wounds, they would typically opt to hide and recover first before doing anything else. But the bear seemed not to care about the wounds and instead acted as if nothing else mattered other than filling up its stomach.

The Wolf Girl tensed up her hind legs and went into a prone position. This time she intended to destroy its four eyes first so that it would have no chance to escape.

Just as she was ready to go, footsteps could be heard coming from the depths of the jungle.

Lorgar was stunned for a moment.

Why are there such orderly footsteps in the depths of the Barbarian Land?

The new group's footsteps were very heavy and loud, and they apparently didn't care about making their presence known. The alternating sounds of one-two footsteps meant that they were humans, and there were more than one.

Did some hunters from Neverwinter lose their way?

"No..." She immediately rejected this idea. It would take over ten days to come here from the border of Graycastle. Considering the dense forest and wild grassland, it would take more time if they had to walk on land. Not to mention the fact that there were fierce beasts and snakes everywhere once you pass the grasslands. Moreover, hybrid demonic beats roam the grounds around the Taquila ruins. Even if someone had lost their way, they wouldn't have been able to reach here alive.

Lorgar suddenly thought of an answer.

A seemingly reasonable answer, and one that was much-anticipated by her.

At that moment, she felt the hair on her body stand up straight, and her heart started to beat violently. Though she was extremely nervous, her body instantly entered a battle-ready state.

The demonic bear also noticed this unusual sound. It dropped the half-eaten deer leg, climbed up and roared toward the direction of the footsteps.

The bush shook, and the staggered branches were pushed open. Two ugly and ferocious monsters then emerged out of the shadows.

They had dark brown skin and muscled arms, and also wore skull helmets and held deadly-looking bone spears.

Exactly the same as Lightning had described—

They were the demons!

She had finally found them!

The moment the demons appeared, the demonic hybrid bear launched its attack.

It lifted its still-intact front paw and plunged toward the newcomers who dared disturb its feast at a speed which far exceeded that of which should be possible for something as large as itself.

In addition to the demonic bear's power, the charge was further strengthened by the momentum of its entire body. This move was no less deadly than the Four-winged Eagle's dive from the sky. If it were Lorgar facing the charge, she would definitely try to avoid it. After all, she was not an Extraordinary and would have to pay a huge price to block this strike.

But instead of dodging, one of the demons stepped forward, and one of its arms quickly swelled and clashed directly against the giant palm of the demonic beast. With a muffled sound, the two monsters crashed into each other!

It was a stalemate!

Neither the demonic bear nor the demon could push further. But the demon was much shorter than the bear, so it would be unfavorable for the demon if this had dragged on.

However, there was more than one demon!

Another Mad Demon had taken the bone spear and aimed it at the hybrid demonic beast.

The fight was going to end in a moment, and Lorgar had but moments to spare if she wished to take action.

Leave or stay?

"Although the tube on the back of the demon is its weakness, it is

still difficult to deal with." She suddenly recalled Lightning's warning. "If you meet the enemies, you'd better immediately retreat and report it to His Majesty."

Reason also told her that she needed to retreat, but her instincts were telling her otherwise as a burning sensation surged through her body.

No, this was not something that she needed to think about.

It was dangerous, but this was what she came for, wasn't it?

According to the information, the Mad Demon would experience a significant period of weakness after its arms had swelled. Lorgar could take advantage of this even if she were fighting against two demons!

"Shoo—"

With a piercing sound, the bone spear shot through the air.

At the same time, Lorgar pounced out of the shadows and bit towards the demon which was still struggling against the bear.

Chapter 898: Dark Tide

Everything happened in the blink of an eye.

With a flash of white, the bone spear directly pierced the demonic bear's chest. It had happened so quickly that it could not be captured by the naked eye. If it were Lorgar that was the target, with that kind of distance, she could not have avoided it.

It seemed that the demon was aware of the giant wolf that leaped out of the bush, but it was unable to block or avoid the attack as its right hand was still struggling with the demonic bear's paw. It only managed to raise its other arm to protect its head by instinct.

This action protected its throat but left its left arm exposed to Princess Lorgar.

Without the slightest hesitation, she bit into the demon's arm and tore it apart. The heavy taste of blood immediately spread into her mouth.

Compared to the enormous demonic bear, which had near-impenetrable skin, the Mad Demon's skin was similar to a human's in softness. Even though they had bulging muscles, their flesh was still as soft as a piece of cloth between Lorgar's fangs.

The effortlessness with which Lorgar's fangs tore apart the demon's arm gave her an immediate confidence boost!

Lorgar then moved past the demon and created a distance between them.

She remained unhurt while one of her enemies had lost the means needed to continue the fight.

That was undoubtedly an extremely successful attack.

The badly hurt Mad Demon did not move until the hybrid demonic beast fell. It then stumbled back a few steps and roared at her angrily. However, it had lost its left arm and its right arm had

now shrunk. It was barely able to keep itself up, let alone be a threat to her.

But at this moment, the other demon's actions surprised Lorgar.

She saw it take out a horn from its pocket and began blowing into it.

"Woo———"

Its deep sound broke the silence of the forest and scared off a group of birds.

What does this mean?

Are there other demons nearby?

But she had already scouted out the area. With the exception of beehives and bird nests, which Lightning had asked her to mark, she did not find anything else worthwhile around here.

Lorgar decided not to think about it and would first kill the one-armed demon.

Even if they had reinforcements, there would only be corpses waiting for them by the time they arrived.

She rushed forward and pounced towards the demon. The demon dropped its horn, pulled out a stone ax that was hanging on its waist, and slashed towards the Wolf Girl!

If this had happened six months ago, Lorgar would have chosen to avoid its edge, stepped back, and looked for another opportunity; however, after the battle with the Extraordinary, the Four-winged Eagle, and many kinds of hybrid demonic beasts, she had made many improvements in terms of her combat skill.

Lorgar lowered her body and extended her hand and leg to one side, and sprung from this seemingly awkward angle with her body nearly flying out sideways!

The ax missed its target.

However, this move by Lorgar wasn't merely just a dodge. When the demon's attention was distracted by her movements and fixated on her mouth and claws, she launched her real attack. Lorgar curled her huge tail and swept it towards the back of the demon's head. This blow took full advantage of her body's momentum and was just like an invisible hook.

"Thud!"

With a muffled sound, the surprised demon flew away and hit a nearby tree. Its stone ax was flung to the ground.

"Roar——!"

Just as Lorgar was ready to seize the opportunity to deal the finishing blow with her claws, she suddenly heard a shrill roar from behind.

Her instincts warned her of immediate danger. She turned around and swept her paws sideways to block the one-armed Mad Demon which had rushed towards her. Her claw struck hard and cracked the ribs of the demon, even piercing through the leather armor on its body.

This was a suicidal attack. It seemed that the demon had deliberately embraced her giant paw with its body.

Why?

Lorgar immediately knew the answer to her question before the thought had barely left her mind.

The shrunken right arm of the one-armed Mad Demon began to swell up again!

Wasn't it only supposed to recover after seven minutes?

Lorgar was shocked and tried to get away from the enemy. However, her claw was tightly clong onto by the demon as if pinched by an iron plier.

Why? Does it...

She quickly turned to the other demon that was struck by her tail, and her heart sank.

The demon's arm also swelled up, and a few veins even burst out of its dry skin.

Wait a second... She suddenly remembered what Lightning had said. When they encountered the demons on the hot air balloon in the Great Snow Mountain of the Western Region, the Mad Demon did show the ability to throw spears twice within a short period of time. However, the strength of the second throw had decreased dramatically, and the demon's arm, which was embedded with magic stone, was rendered useless. It could be described as a suicidal technique, and not very threatening. She was stupid to believe what Lightning had said.

She couldn't believe this. Lorgar had almost got herself killed by the words of a foolish girl!

Although this desperate struggle by the demons would cause them severe backlash, it could also cause huge trouble for their opponent, especially in a life-and-death situation such as this one. There was a common saying in the Sand Nation which could explain this current situation: "Beware a cornered fighter." Since they had already put their life aside, their last blows would naturally be deadly.

The demon that was holding Lorgar's arm was not able to completely restrain her actions. This would only be possible for an Extraordinary. However, Lorgar understood that her opponent's purpose was to slow down her movement. Even if she tried to turn around or dodge, she would not be able to escape the other demon's fatal blow.

In just a few seconds, the Mad Demon's arm had swelled to its maximum size, and blue blood spurted out from the cracked skin as if the whole arm was going to explode at any moment.

It held its last bone spear and aimed it at the Wolf Girl.

At this moment, Lorgar could only take a gamble!

Lorgar opened her eyes wide and focused on every movement made by the enemy. For a moment, the world seemed to have turned silent. The only sound she could hear was her own heart beat.

As soon as the Mad Demon threw the spear, she cut off the surging magic power in her body.

Her body began to quickly shrink in size, creating a huge gap in the initially tight grasp of the Mad Demon. To the spear throwing demon, it basically had its target swapped out at the last moment.

The bone spear, which flew through the air like a streak of lighting towards the head of the huge desert wolf, pierced the broken-arm demon instead. At this point, she had already finished transforming back to her human form.

She won the gamble.

The spear thrower did not expect her to do this. Stunned, it held its now withered arm and uttered out two syllables when Princess Lorgar walked in front of it.

"Ta...qui..."

Lorgar then transformed one hand into a wolf's claw and crushed the demon's helmet.

As the Red Mist dispersed, the demon collapsed to the ground with a soft thud

Only then did Lorgar dare to relax and let out a long breath.

She had won!

One versus two!

The demons were not that strong after all.

Even though the demons were amazingly powerful after strengthening their arms, they had no combat skills at all. They

mainly fought by instinct, which was a waste of their physique and talent. In terms of the warrior's path, the demons had not reached very far at all. She believed that hunting would become easier for her if she had a few more encounters with these demons.

The vast Barbarian Land that spread out around her would become the best place for training.

Then Lorgar heard the sound of tremors. It was as if the earth itself was shaking. It felt as if an immense force started to roll over the lands like a tsunami.

"Sh— sh— "

How is this possible?

She frowned a little and raised her ears towards the source. She was in the land close to Graycastle. This was not like the Southernmost Region, which was close to the sea. She was not supposed to hear waves here. Was it a flood? But there was no mountains or rivers here, so a flood wouldn't be possible.

Lorgar looked around and climbed up the highest tree she could find.

The tremor came from the direction of the Taquila ruins.

The next moment startled the Wolf Girl as she stood at the end of one of the tree's branches.

She saw countless demons appear on the horizon, moving forward like a dark tide. Above the tide were hundreds of Devilbeasts, flying back and forth in formation. Most inconceivable of all was the group of colossal monsters stomping their way toward the ruins. They were as tall as ten-story buildings, and the four twisted legs could almost climb over Taquila's city walls directly. Anyone standing in front of them would look insignificant. That's not even considering how hard it would be to launch an attack against it. Even just standing in front of it would make a person lose their will to fight.

Lorgar looked up at the sky, which was particularly blue after the rain. A soft breeze would blow past every once in a while and the white clouds floated in the sky. Everything was as it should be and it seemed so quiet and peaceful.

Lorgar neither saw the Bloody Moon that symbolized the doomsday described by Lightning nor did she see the gloomy and depressing Red Mist.

But she knew that disaster had come knocking.

Chapter 899: The Witches From Afar (Part I)

"I see the port!"

Molly's sudden exclamation immediately drew the attention of the witches on deck.

"Where? Where?"

"Sigh...We're finally almost there. It has been about half a month since we started to float around the sea..."

"That silver speck over there is another ship, isn't it?"

"Didn't somebody said that only the 'Charming Beauty' sails on this route?"

"Then it's probably a fishing boat."

Everybody went to the railing and stood on tiptoes to get a better look at where Molly was pointing to.

Seeing the witches all excited and cheerful, the old captain Jack "The One-eyed" shook his head with a smile. He turned to Camilla Dary, who unlike the rest of the witches, had a stern look on her face, and asked, "You don't look quite excited. What's wrong? Today is a good day."

"Good in what way?" Camilla replied indifferently.

"Good to be home." Jack shook his pipe and said, "Is returning to your homeland after so many years not worth celebrating? It is obvious that you guys never considered the Sleeping Island as your home. Not that I'm saying you dislike living at the Fjords, but after all, a refuge is still just a refuge."

Camilla didn't know what to say to that. She did not know whether Jack was right, but she knew that most of the witches who were willing to go to the Western Region of Graycastle had increased after the arrival of Princess Tilly's letter. Initially, only half of the witches wanted to go, but the number had risen to

around 80% after. If the first batch of witches were able to properly settle in Graycastle, then it would be hard to say how many of the witches would still be left in Sleeping Island.

Sleeping Island should have been their home. It was a place where they wouldn't be hated for being who they are, and also where the church did not constantly threaten their lives. Although the island was relatively underdeveloped compared with the kingdoms on the continent and had a huge difference in terms of local customs and traditions, she believed that Sleeping Island would prosper given ten more years. Perhaps, it would not even take one generation before newly-awakened witches treated the island as their real hometown.

After a long silence, Camilla spoke in a low voice, "I wish what you said was true."

"Hmm." Jack stroke his beards. "You don't trust the new king?"

"How did you know?" Camilla looked up.

"it was written on your face." The old captain smiled. "Do you remember what you looked like three years ago when you sailed out for the first time?"

"Three years ago..." The steward of Sleeping Island contemplated for a while. That was when Princess Tilly started to gather the witches and encouraged them to leave Graycastle. As one of the few captains who did not discriminate against witches, Jack and the "Charming Beauty" had smuggled a large number of witches from harbor cities to the Fjords with the risk of getting caught and being sent to trial. That was why Sleeping Island had built a long-lasting and intimate friendship with the one-eyed captain.

"Perhaps worn-out and frightened?" Camilla answered hesitantly.

"Worn-out and frightened?" Jack burst into laughter. "Just that? You were no better than a bunch of walking dead at that time, all

beaten-up and desperate. Look at yourselves now. Don't you feel completely different? The past is the past. You should look ahead. Some of the witches had already been to Neverwinter several times. If it were really that miserable of a place, they wouldn't have such bright smiles on their faces right now."

"But the nobles are all two-faced..."

"But are you?" The captain interrupted her. "If I remember correctly, you're also from a noble family, aren't you? You were better dressed than anyone else the day you left Graycastle. Civilians can't afford silk fabrics. If I detested nobles like you do back then, what would have had happened?"

"..." Camilla opened her mouth, grasping for words that did not come.

Jack "The One-eyed" slowly blew a tendril of white smoke. "I don't think you can judge a person only by his background. Other than the Three Gods, who can choose their own family? The same goes for witches... Don't you think that you hating nobles because they are nobles is the same as people blindly hating witches?"

The words sent a faint shiver through Camilla's heart.

"Perhaps you could say that you understand what the nobles are because you were one of them. But don't forget that your prejudice could potentially harm someone innocent, as long as there exists a person that doesn't fit your mold." The old captain paused for a second and said, "Sorry, child... I am probably not the best person to lecture you on this, but I don't want to see you let your past cloud your judgment—what I said doesn't only apply to this matter. After all, people can't always live in the past."

"No, nobody else would say something like this to me," Camilla thought to herself. Princess Tilly must know that people should look forward to the future and not live in the past. That was why she had voluntarily traveled to Neverwinter. However, Camilla knew Princess Tilly would never be so open to her, and certainly

would not criticize her hatred for the nobles. Their intimate relationship and the respects Tilly had for her prevented the princess from giving her further counsels.

Perhaps, the old captain was the only person on Sleeping Island who would view her as a child.

Camilla breathed out a long sigh and said, "You may be right."

"Right?" Jack chuckled. "I'm old and happen to have a lot of similar experiences. If I don't always keep optimistic, I wouldn't have been able to sail on the sea for this long. But the things are most likely going to get tough in the near-future."

"Why?"

"Who else would board the "charming Beauty once you witches all return to the main continent? I've heard from those big Chambers of Commerce that a new type of ship that doesn't require a sail will soon replace the current wooden boats and be used by the majority of the merchants at Fjords. Those new ships would be a lot faster than this old baby and can also carry a lot more. I bet nobody will ever use her again. Not even for transporting cargo."

"I can probably talk to Princess Tilly about this..."

"Talk about what? Do you want to support me for the rest of my life?" The old captain tapped his pipe. "That'll be a little too early. My legs haven't given away yet! In fact, I plan to join Sir Thunder's expedition team after you guys arrive at Graycastle."

"Expedition?" Camilla echoed in surprise.

"That's right. If I can find something in an unexploited sea across Shadow Islands, the money I can earn from that will be more than enough to let me build my own fleet if I wanted to. Not to mention supporting myself." Jack "The One-eyed" turned around and looked at the vast ocean spiritedly. "Although I'm getting old and my legs are no longer as nimble as they were used to be, I can

guarantee you that no captain in the entire Fjords 's better at navigating the seas than me!"

"Really..." Camilla asked in her heart. She glanced at the Fjordian old man as if it were the first time she met him. His appearance was nothing extraordinary, but the current expression on his face perfectly demonstrated his fearlessness in facing the unknown future.

"Captain, we are nearing the shores!" The lookout perching on the mast yelled.

"Do I still have to tell you what to do next?" Jack looked up and stared at him. "Take in the sail and slow her down!"

Camilla looked toward the dock area and found there were red banners of different kinds everywhere, all of which read "Welcome to Neverwinter." Among the people who came to greet them, there were not only witches but also ordinary people. She even saw a column of children around 11 to 12 years old, each of them with a bouquet in their hands. The children were standing next to the trestle waiting for the witches' arrival.

"Such a marvelous reception." The old captain whistled. "Just for the way the King is greeting you, you should give him some more credit, right?" He then waved his arm at the busy sailors on the deck. "Lads, get ready to dock. We've arrived at Neverwinter!"

Chapter 900: The Witches From Afar (Part II)

"Is this really alright?" Wendy said quietly as she pointed to the ordinary people on the dock. "I mean, we hired random people to greet the witches from Sleeping Island... If the witches knew the truth, they surely wouldn't be pleased about it."

"Are you able to find any residents who truly welcome their arrival?" Scroll asked in an equally low voice.

"... No." Wendy hesitated for a moment and shook her head. Indeed, it was hard to find even one or two residents who would welcome the witches from the bottom of their heart, let alone a group of them. Although citizens in Neverwinter had gradually started to accept the witches under Roland's influences, and some witches were even adored by the public, the immigrants from Sleeping Islands were strangers to them. It was basically impossible to ask people to stop their work and greet a group of witches they had never met.

Without Kind Roland's presence, only the families of the First Army could be persuaded to do so.

"Therefore, there's nothing wrong with His Majesty's arrangement." Scroll shrugged. "All the expenses incurred in this welcoming has already been included in Neverwinter's budget, including the expenses for those big red bouquets, banners, and family greeting teams. If you don't use that part of the money, the other departments will. His Majesty originally planned to have the welcome reception on a much bigger scale than this."

"Well, you might be right..." Wendy swiped at the non-existent sweat on her forehead. His Majesty had been extremely excited ever since Princess Tilly had told him that the witches on Sleeping Island were coming here. Apart from what Scroll had just mentioned, Roland had also listed many other welcome events on

his memo, such as ceremonial parades, a musical, and fireworks. Had the news from Hill Fawkes not prompted Roland to carry out his war plan immediately, Roland would have hosted the ceremony himself, which undoubtedly would have made things even more jubilant and spectacular.

Scroll said smilingly, "That's why directly hiring people is the best option. We don't just recruit random guys. Those selected ones are all families with good city hall records. You don't need to worry." She took a short pause and continued, "The witches are coming. Go meet them, Ms. chief of the Union."

"Scroll!" Wendy raised her voice, looking at the former reproachfully. Then she gave Princess Tilly a curt nod before walking up to the guests who came here all the way from the island.

"Nice to meet you!" As the two groups of witches met each other, Wendy opened her arms and greeted them with her most gentle voice while smiling. "I'm the superintendent of the Witch Union. Welcome to Neverwinter!"

...

According to the agreement, the witches from Sleeping Island were only considered as ordinary subjects of the Western Region and would not be under the management of the Witch Union. As such, Wendy decided to take them to the residential area first and have a rough head count so that the City Hall would know how much food to provide to the new group of witches. As for the subsequent tour and work schedules, she planned to discuss that with Lady Tilly only after everybody settled down.

The construction of the residential area exclusively for the use of the witches from Sleeping Island had been completed two months before their arrival. It was located close to the Miracle Building and was named Sleeping Spell, the same name used by the Bounty Guild.

Some of the witches gasped at the sight of the "magnificent building" which was now six stories' high.

They were especially impressed with the polished and glossy surface of the concrete.

"Are these real stones? Why do they look so smooth?"

"We're not going to be staying here, are we?"

"Stop dreaming. This must be the Lord's castle."

"The view from the top floor must be breathtaking."

Seeing everyone was burning with curiosity, Wendy took this opportunity to make a brief introduction. "The building is only half-complete at the moment. Once the construction is done, it will reach 55 meters, which is 180 feet and 5 inches. But His Majesty doesn't live here. His castle is only three stories' tall and is located in the center of Neverwinter."

"That's so tall... Aren't you afraid that it'll collapse one day?" someone questioned in surprise.

Wendy smiled. "His Majesty invented a special construction material that can convert fluid slimes to solid stones. This is simply a pilot project. He told us that we will be able to build architecture as tall as the mountains with this type of material. Of course, the whole project cannot be successfully completed without the help of the witches. In fact, this building is the result of the joint efforts of the witches and numerous construction workers. Am I right, Lotus?"

"Hey, did you really build this?"

"But isn't your ability elevating earth?"

All the witches rested their eyes on Lotus.

A little embarrassed, Lotus scratched her head and answered, "I just build slopes for the workers. When they need to add another floor, I elevate the surrounding earth to create a platform next to

the building to make it a bit more convenient for the construction workers."

"Did... they hate or show disgust at you because you're a witch?" As expected, someone raised the question that everybody was most concerned about.

"I haven't come across anyone like that yet. I think they've already started to treat me like a normal person." Lotus waved her hand. "Sometimes, the workers will even share pancakes with me if I went to work early."

This was the exact effect Wendy desired to achieve. "Perhaps a lot of you are still cautious of the people here and wonder how you'll be treated in the future. That's perfectly normal, after all, Neverwinter to you is a completely foreign city. I don't think I have to go on about the miseries that had fallen upon us witches over this past century. However, I assure you that you'll feel at home here, just like the city name endowed by His Majesty suggests. I understand that you aren't a member of the Witch Union, but please don't hesitate to ask me for help if you encounter any difficulties. No matter how small it seems to be, I'm here for you."

"Good job." Scrolled gave Wendy a thumbs-up and whispered to her approvingly.

...

Wendy did not expect, however, that the first problem arose when she tried to gather the personal information of the witches.

"Why do you need such information?" A red-haired witch protested after Wendy distributed the forms. "Didn't you agree not to force us to stay here? I just plan to stay here for a couple of days, so I don't think it's necessary."

"Me too. Princess Tilly told us that we could leave Neverwinter whenever we wanted to. I want to go back to the Eastern Region

right now."

"Since the church is gone now, I don't think it's necessary to disclose our personal information. It'll put us in a very disadvantageous position if the information leaks to someone with malicious intent."

There were quite a few witches who opposed to registering their personal information.

"I knew it... It's Azima and her little clique again." Ashes knitted her brows.

"Azima?" Wendy asked in surprise.

"A witch organization from the Eastern Region. Sorry, they don't really acknowledge my leadership," Tilly explained in a low voice. "But they're at least much better than the Bloodfang Association." Tilly turned to the red-haired witch and said, "I understand that you yearn to return to the Eastern Region, but this is not a good time. Although the church has fallen from power, the public is still unfriendly to witches, not to mention those nobles. The situation is particularly bad in the Eastern Region. Before Roland officially retrieves that area, the attitude of people toward witches would not change much over there."

"How do you know that if you haven't been there?" Azima persisted. "Or maybe you're just favoring your brother?"

"Mind your attitude." Ashes retorted coldly.

"Why? Are you going to pick a fight with me here, like you did to Heidi and Skyflare?"

Wendy bit her lip. She did not foresee such a bitter confrontation, but she could not find a proper way to ease the tension between the two parties.

Just at that moment, Scroll stepped forward.

"Mind if I ask you a few questions?" She asked.

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